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**AN ANALYSIS OF ORGANIZATIONAL DECISION-MAKING:  
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AND  
ATF RAID AT WACO  
AS CASE STUDIES**

**BY**

**Andrea D. Begel, Capt, USAF**

**B.A., Foreign Affairs, University of Virginia, 1991**

**THESIS**

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

**Master of Arts  
Sociology**

The University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  
**December, 1997**

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**ABSTRACT**

Every day organizations make decisions, triggering a chain of events, initiating certain activities, resulting in certain outcomes. Some organizations must manage incidents involving extreme levels of risk, under high levels of stress. Government agencies, law enforcement agencies, and military organizations are often presented with such scenarios. When outcomes are favorable, credit is given to the leadership, who presumably made the right decisions, and to those who carried out the decisions, presumably for their great skill in executing what needed to be done. When outcomes are not favorable, days, months, even years are spent analyzing what went wrong, and why. Often, failure is said to result from "bad luck" or failure to execute one portion of a plan, which inevitably led to overall failure. By analyzing failed operations in high-stress, high-risk environments, one can argue that blaming the failure of large-scale operations on one step in a chain of events is to neglect real underlying symptoms of poor organizational decision-making, poor strategic planning, and poor contingency planning.

My analysis of organizational decision-making assumes a traditional “rational-actor” model inadequately explains why some operations succeed and others fail. By exploring organizational culture, I identify symptoms of defective decision-making and seemingly irrational decisions, and contend that effective organizational design and risk management enables organizations to overcome risk. The relationship between strategy and decision-making is discussed with reference to long-established doctrine on the keys to conducting successful tactical operations, and the integral role strategy plays in establishing a decision-making framework.

The Iran hostage rescue attempt and Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) raid at Waco illustrate symptoms of defective decision-making, exposing the impact organizational culture can have on an organization’s ability to plan and execute high-risk operations. Elaborating on existing organizational decision-making theory can only enhance the ability of leaders to recognize the role organizational culture plays in decision-making, and assist decision-makers with identifying vulnerabilities and avoiding pitfalls before tragedy occurs.

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## **CHAPTER 1: Introduction**

In today's world of the information superhighway, not a day goes by without the appearance of a report highlighting some individual's or corporation's miscalculations. The mistake may be presented as a poor business decision, an ill-conceived policy, or just plain bad luck. In many cases, the ramifications are temporary. A corporation may experience a decrease in quarterly earnings, the threat of bankruptcy, or a criminal investigation. An individual may find himself unemployed, transferred to another position, or making a public apology for the error in judgment. However, for an organization whose daily operations involve life-threatening situations, poor decisions can have very severe, very immediate, and very long-lasting repercussions. Poor decisions in a crisis environment can lead to tragic events, which take their place in history as fiascos.

A fiasco inevitably leads to a flurry of analysis regarding the cause of the failure. A summary of events traces each step of the crisis to the critical point at which failure ensued. From countless details a list of "causes" is isolated and included in a report, in hopes that history does not repeat itself. Of course, the analysis is done in hindsight, where the "causes" seem to be blatantly obvious. Surprisingly, in many cases, even when the results were near catastrophic, the response by participants in such fiascos has often been to remind themselves and the public that to err is human. But, if the flaws are so obvious after the fiasco, why were they not obvious to the people involved in the operation? A simple answer would be that the people involved were not qualified to make the decisions they were called upon to make. Yet, many of the personnel involved in past fiascos were experts in their field, were hand-picked for their responsibilities,

and had performed admirably in what appeared to have been similar previous circumstances. I reject the argument that humans are, by nature, imperfect and will make mistakes, and therefore a certain number of events will inevitably fail due to human error. Alternative explanations may be found by analyzing the environment in which organizations make decisions when responding to stressful circumstances.

High risk law enforcement operations and military special operations take place because of generally unfavorable circumstances. In most cases, they are a last resort on a long list of options ranging from negotiations to economic sanctions to a possible siege, and then finally, to some sort of dynamic assault. By definition, a special operation is an action "conducted by specially organized, trained, and equipped military and paramilitary forces to achieve military, diplomatic, economic, or psychological objectives by unconventional means." (FM 100-5, p.2-20) In any special operation, the risks are high, and the chances of success may not be greater than those in a coin toss. And yet the capability to attempt an operation of this nature is a necessity for any world power, any government seeking to maintain its legitimacy, and any government agency responsible for maintaining order or protecting critical assets. The question is why organizations progress down a path leading to failure, when, in hindsight, it seems unbelievable that certain decisions would be made, certain actions would be taken, and certain corrective actions would NOT be taken. Even more problematic is the fact that there do seem to be common conditions within the analyses, which suggest that if identified and corrected during the initial sequence of events, a great deal of risk could have been avoided.

The theoretical foundation of this research is drawn from both organizational theory and military strategy. My argument follows one component of organizational

theory known as high reliability theory. High reliability theorists believe that through organizational design and risk management, serious accidents CAN be prevented, and safe operations are possible. The opposing school of thought would take a “normal accidents theory” approach which follows the more pessimistic view that serious accidents involving complex systems are inevitable. In his book The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons, Scott Sagan argues that through decentralization of authority, strong organizational culture, and continuous operations and training, standard safe operating procedures become second nature. Through trial-and-error processes, anticipation, and simulation, organizations can minimize risk. (Sagan, p.27).

By analyzing the processes and strategy an organization uses to make decisions during a crisis, as well as the environment in which those decisions are made, its possible to compare the way an organization behaves to what the literature says about how bureaucracies typically behave. Did the bureaucracy behave the way we expected it to behave? Did this behavior contribute to the problems the bureaucracy encountered, or was the bureaucratic nature of the organization inappropriately blamed for the operation's failure?

Sagan's work suggests that while the strategies organizations use are not always fully developed or perfectly implemented, they do suggest elements of “*a complete system for averting catastrophe*” (Sagan, p. 14). The results of an organization's efforts are deemed to be a product of a deliberate process in which risks are monitored, evaluated, and minimized. In other words, systematic procedures are repeatedly used in an effort to reduce potentially unsafe outcomes. This suggests that a set of principles do

exist which, when incorporated into an organization's strategy for managing high risk operations, can effectively contribute to safe, reliable, operations. Indeed, there are a set of principles related to the conduct of high risk tactical operations which are generally accepted as the core building blocks for sound operations. Even though high risk tactical operations are sometimes conducted by non-military organizations, the most frequently cited sources of strategy take a military perspective. For this reason, I have relied on a combination of military doctrine and classic analyses of military strategy for a theoretical foundation of strategy.

Military strategy is a subject which has been analyzed extensively. However, since Sun Tzu wrote what many feel remains the cornerstone of military strategy, The Art of War, over 2,500 years ago, there has been startlingly little variation in the basic tenets deemed key to the successful execution of military operations. Carl von Clausewitz' 19<sup>th</sup> century classic On War translated many of Sun Tzu's concepts into the language of modern warfare, but even with the dramatic technological advances of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the basic principles remain largely unchanged. The study of military operations throughout history is uniquely valuable, in that the decisions made were based on many of the same criteria used today, and the same potential exists now to face leadership challenges which share many common characteristics with past scenarios. Similarly, those events of the past which were resounding successes serve to validate the continued reliance on these principles of warfare. For these reasons, it makes sense to critique the strategy devised and implemented by organizations involved in critical decision-making, as well as the degree to which these principles were emphasized in continuous operations and training, or were part of the organizational culture. The issue of whether leaders



actually develop a strategy, to what degree, and with what degree of expertise has a great impact on the outcome of any critical incident.

Strategy can provide the framework in which decisions are made. Conversely, lack of a clear, coherent strategy presents an inherently unstable decision-making environment. In this way, strategy and decision-making theory are in many ways intertwined. From a military standpoint, strategy refers to a kind of universal logic which *"encompasses the conduct and consequences of human relations in the context of actual or possible armed conflict"* (Luttwak, p. xi). Strategy can explain actions that are taken as well as those that are not. In his classic work Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace, Edward N. Luttwak presents the concept of strategy as a paradox which oftentimes violates linear logic by *"inducing the coming together and even the reversal of opposites."* As an example, he argues that only in conflict can a bad road be a good road *precisely because it is bad*, in that it may be less strongly defended by the enemy, and therefore a better choice for a maneuver (Luttwak, p.7). It is precisely this paradoxical nature of strategy that may explain why decisions made during crises may, in retrospect, defy logic. However, this is merely one example of the broader role that strategy may play in the theory of decision-making.

While it's true that poor strategy can lead to poor execution, it is also true that sound strategy may not prevent mission failure. But if a strategy is sound, recognized, and utilized, what are the mechanisms at work which lead to operational failure? In James Q. Wilson's book Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It, he claims that every organization has a culture which is made up of a patterned way of thinking about the central tasks of human relationships within the organization

(Wilson, p.91). An organization's culture is similar to an individual's personality, and is commonly passed on from one generation to another, changing slowly, if at all. Organizations with culture have a strong sense of mission, and have reached the point where as an organization they have answered not only the question "what shall we do?" but also "what shall we be?" (Wilson, p.92). In most large organizations, culture is a complex phenomena in that to the outsider, there may be a uniform culture, but within the organization, there are arguably a number of distinct and sometimes conflicting cultures within the same unit. It is the interplay of the different cultures within and between organizations which shape the course of decision-making, and which can have a profound impact on the planning and execution of high-risk operations.

The theoretical foundation thus far presents a somewhat paradoxical picture. High reliability theorists are optimistic in their assessment that it is possible to conduct safe, reliable, high risk operations, and that fiascoes are not just an inevitable fact of life. Furthermore, there is a body of principles available which is accepted with confidence as key to sound strategy and operational success. And yet, history demonstrates that these principles are not always followed--under stressful conditions, organizations do not always follow the procedures that minimize risk. The question is, what causes the break from established procedures? What leads trained, competent units to neglect critical elements of successful operations, and what prevents an organization from recognizing it strayed from its intended course and that corrective actions are needed in order to avert catastrophe before it happens? Even more perplexing is the instance of an operation failing in spite of sound strategy. What are the forces at work in this situation?

There are many examples in history of crises which were resolved under very stressful situations, involving organizations which may or may not have operated in the manner proposed by high reliability organization theorists. These organizations may have been bureaucratic, and may have implemented strategies which were adequate, but perhaps not flawless. The operations may have involved an organization with a strong culture which tended to isolate decision-makers from potential sources of assistance. And yet in some instances, these organizations somehow overcame these obstacles and were able to stay on track and accomplish their objectives.

A key factor that may have enabled these organizations to achieve their objective is the concept of operational tempo. The term bureaucratic inertia is most often used in the context of the difficulty faced in getting a bureaucracy to respond in a timely manner, or to move at all. The term inertia comes from physics, and is defined in the dictionary as "the tendency of a body to resist acceleration." However, the second definition describes the more theoretically interesting notion of the tendency of "a body in motion to stay in motion unless acted upon by an outside force." It is precisely this phenomena which appears to be at work during the planning and execution phases of complex, high risk incidents. An organization starts out on a designated path, and at some point the inertia to continue down that path becomes so great, that external attempts to change course seem futile, and are not attempted at all. The momentum of the operation reaches some critical mass, leading to decisions which in hindsight appear completely irrational. Even individuals in a position to recommend or even initiate corrective action fail to do so. The tempo of the operation seems to have taken on a life of its own. Estimates of success are inflated, vulnerabilities downplayed, and options eliminated. Contingency

operations, if considered, receive low priority, and all attention is focused on the final objective.

It is this form of bureaucratic inertia which accelerates the pace of operations down one path, and eventually hurtles an organization toward catastrophe. Those organizations which have been able to avert catastrophe managed to control the tempo of their operations, and avoided taking a flawed path which would push the operation to a critical mass. In strategic terms, the key to controlling the momentum of an operation lies in maintaining and controlling the initiative, and focusing on the final objective. For those organizations which somehow lost control over the tempo of their operations, there may be common themes which lend explanation to why control was lost, or why the organization became vulnerable to failure. It remains to be seen whether the same commonality exists among successful operations.

By conducting case studies of two recent exercises in organizational decision-making under stressful conditions, it is possible to frame these operations within the context of organizational theory and military strategy. The challenge is to isolate decisions which stand out as departures from established strategy or defy logical explanation, to determine the factors which contributed to those decisions, and to relate the findings to existing theory. Elaborating upon existing analyses of organizational decision-making can help organizations to identify their own vulnerabilities and take steps to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.

## **CHAPTER 2: Data Sources**

This analysis is based upon two case studies; the U.S. military's attempt to rescue American hostages in Iran in 1980 and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) raid on the Branch-Davidian compound near Waco, Texas in 1993. Multiple sources were utilized to compile the information presented in this study.

Initially, I accomplished a thorough review of historical documents. My sources of information included government documents, memoirs, books published about the events, magazines and journal articles, and newspaper articles. I also reviewed a variety of theoretical works on organizations, decision-making, and military strategy. I built upon my knowledge of these case studies by conducting interviews of individuals who either participated in these events, were involved in the investigation of the fiascoes in their aftermath, or are now recognized experts in the planning and execution of operations of this nature.

Information gleaned from these sources of data are presented here to further explain the forces at work during the planning and execution of high-risk operations. The opinions presented here should not be interpreted as the official policy of the United States Air Force, or any other federal agency referenced herein.

## **CHAPTER 3. The Iran Hostage Rescue Mission**

### **A. Summary of Events**

During the early morning hours of 24 April 1980, a task force of 130 Army special forces and support personnel, along with approximately 50 pilots and aircrew members were forced to abort the attempted rescue of 53 Americans being held hostage by Iranian militants in Tehran. The on-scene commander made the decision to abort after three of his eight helicopters, for various reasons, were unable to complete the assigned mission according to plan. To make matters worse, after the decision a helicopter collided with an Air Force transport plane, killing eight personnel. The remainder of the force withdrew to safety, leaving behind five helicopters, weapons and ordinance, communications equipment, sensitive documents, and maps, under the assumption that a pending air strike would demolish the trail of evidence. The use of a tactical air strike was then disapproved by President Jimmy Carter, who did not want to jeopardize the lives of 40 Iranians who were captured during the operation, and who also feared additional action would place the lives of the American hostages in immediate danger (Ryan, p.1).

The aborted rescue plan had intended to transport soldiers, their equipment, and helicopter fuel from a forward operating base to a secret landing strip in Iran, which was designated "Desert One." There, the forces would rendezvous with eight helicopters dispatched from the Navy aircraft carrier *USS Nimitz* in the Arabian Sea. The rescue force would board the helicopters and be transported to a remote hideaway known as "Desert Two" 50 miles outside the Tehran city limits. The helicopters would be concealed 15 miles from this site, while the rescue force continued to Tehran using vans

and trucks. At approximately 11pm on the night of the 24<sup>th</sup> of April, the rescue force would penetrate the city, storm the embassy compound and the adjacent Foreign Affairs Ministry, subdue the Iranian militants, and free the hostages. The hostages and the rescue force would then be transported via helicopter from either the embassy grounds or a nearby soccer stadium to an airstrip south of the city, where an Air Force C-141 would be waiting to evacuate the Americans. Were the rescue force to face angry mobs in Tehran, Air Force AC-130 gunships would provide close air support. Approximately eighty Army Rangers would provide security for the final evacuation. This plan however, never progressed beyond its initial stage.

#### **B. The Tasked Organization**

On 4 November 1979, the US embassy in Tehran was overrun by some 500 militant Iranians who, with the Ayatollah Khomeini's blessing, invaded the compound and took 60 Americans hostage. Two days later, President Carter directed National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski to advise the military to devise a rescue plan, and to oversee the development of this course of action. Brzezinski in turn convened a special coordination committee comprised of Defense Secretary Harold Brown, CIA Director Admiral Stansfield Turner, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General David Jones, and his assistant Lieutenant General John S. Pussay. As head of this ad hoc "committee," Brzezinski had no formal command authority over the military but, it became clear to those involved that Brzezinski would be the President's spokesperson regarding the rescue option, in spite of the fact that he had no military background. Therefore, at the highest level of decision-making, an advisory committee was established early on to direct and oversee the rescue option. As alternative actions

proved ineffective, Brzezinski became a strong advocate of the rescue option, seeing a successful raid as a matter of national honor, presidential courage, and international assertiveness (Ryan, p.13).

Once directed to devise a rescue plan, the military was faced with planning an unconventional operation of a scope and size which had never before been attempted. At the time, the military did not have an organization equivalent to today's Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) (developed as a direct result of the lessons learned during this operation), and was forced to form a contingency organization which would be known as the Joint Task Force. It should be noted that while contingency plans did exist which called for the formation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff's Task Force, this plan was not implemented, and an alternative task force was assembled. The Army was appointed as the lead agency, and Major General James B. Vaught, a veteran of three wars and an airborne ranger, was named to lead the task force. From this point, Maj Gen Vaught was compelled to pull recruits from various branches of service and various backgrounds to put together the nucleus of planners required for the special operation (Beckwith, p.174). An important influence on this task was Brzezinski's warning that his gravest concern was to ensure maximum secrecy and avoid leakage throughout the planning and execution of the operation (Ryan, p.12).

The requirement to maintain extreme levels of secrecy led to the compartmentalization of a number of different tasks, which was reflected in the organization of the Joint Task Force. Maj Gen Vaught appointed Colonel Charlie Beckwith, the commander of the Army's newly established Delta Force, to plan the assault portion of the rescue mission. When Beckwith voiced his concerns over the



logistical challenges of conducting an operation on the other side of the world, he was told "that's the responsibility of the air people" (Beckwith, p.174). Maj Gen Philip Gast, USAF, was named a special consultant for air operations, and eventually named deputy task force commander just twelve days before the mission was executed, a move which was said to have been delayed for operational security reasons, but one which reflected the unorthodox if not confusing chain of command which oversaw the mission planning. The flow chart in Appendix A shows the convoluted nature of the overall command structure. The overlapping roles of officers involved in managing the air operation, in particular, divided responsibilities for the training and readiness of the personnel supporting Delta Force, a situation which would be a continuous thorn in the side of both planners and operators throughout the operation.

Presumably for reasons of operational security, the existing intelligence component of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was not used to support operational planning. Instead, General Vaught was compelled to assemble his own intelligence component, which was soon overwhelmed by the enormity of the tasks at hand (Ryan, p.31). Early on, there was consideration given to bringing in special operations "experts" to review and critique planning as it progressed. This idea was dismissed, however, for fear that too many people would have knowledge of the on-going preparations. My research did not uncover who was responsible for the "conscious decision not to form such an element," but records indicate that the motivation behind the decision was again operational security (Ryan, p.31).

The above mentioned participants represented the bulk of the assembled decision-making apparatus. At this point, it is useful to analyze this organization with regard to

the notion of organizational culture. It would be difficult to argue against the reality that within the military command structure, there was definitely homogeneity of backgrounds and ideologies. The joint chiefs of staff represent career military professionals, who have spent on average thirty years of their lives living and breathing military doctrine and the use of military power in administering foreign policy. In terms of ideology, each military member from all of the services receives similar training regarding leadership fundamentals, operational planning, and the role of the military in foreign policy. So from the level of the joint chiefs down to the most junior officer, there would have been a somewhat homogeneous outlook with regard to the mission at hand. But while the senior officers on the planning staff all had combat experience, they were not experts in the fundamentals of planning and executing special operations of this nature. This fact in itself did not have to be an insurmountable obstacle, especially in light of the appointment of Colonel Beckwith, who was thoroughly knowledgeable of special operations, as the tactical planner.

When viewed in light of the group's self-imposed insulation, the issue of a single-minded outlook becomes problematic. During times of crisis, when issues of national security are at stake, the military will seek to insulate itself and minimize contact with people from organizations which could "leak" plans. However, while the task force was being assembled, there was a window of opportunity to infuse a number of individuals who may have been able to provide meaningful and objective guidance to the military's efforts. Once the planning began in earnest, the fear of compromising plans and the effort required to adjust course as a result of an outsider's inputs may have been enough to dissuade key leaders from exercising this option.

A concept closely related to sharing similar ideologies is the notion of cohesion. In the case of the military, cohesiveness is recognized as a necessary but not sufficient component of successfully carrying out a combat operation such as the Iran hostage rescue operation (FM 22-100, p.50). In this case, "amiability and esprit de corps among the members are manifestations of the high degree to which the members value their membership in the group and want to continue to be affiliated," and striving for cohesiveness may not translate into a decision-making environment which places unity above analytical thinking (Janis, p.245). With this in mind, I recognize that there is always a danger in a cohesive organization that independent, critical thinking will be suppressed by desires for cohesion, which only serves to point out that in the case of the military, there is a constant need to be sensitive to vulnerabilities to this type of behavior. However, to more fully understand the prevailing culture (or cultures) within the organization tasked with the planning and execution of the rescue attempt, one must analyze the environment in which the group operated.

### **C. The Decision-Making Environment**

To begin to understand the rationale behind decisions, one must understand the situational context in which these decisions were contemplated. In reality, there were three simultaneous levels of decision-making. At the lowest levels, the tactical planners were working hard to devise a viable plan which, if execution were authorized, would enable US forces to penetrate the air space of Iran, assault the US embassy in Tehran, and extract both the hostages and team members safely, swiftly, and without warning. At the next level, the senior military leadership were making decisions regarding the resources which could be made available to the tactical planners, which options

presented by the tactical planners had the best chances of success, and what assistance was needed from agencies within the United States government and from agencies external to United States government. At the highest levels, the President and the executive branch had the responsibility of deciding at what point, if ever, negotiations were futile, and whether the option of a military extraction should be exercised, whether operational requests by the military could be met without foreign policy implications, and to what degree our foreign allies could be expected to cooperate with our efforts. At all three levels of the decision-making apparatus, external factors came into play.

At the tactical level, the decision-makers were arguably the most insulated from external pressures, and the least burdened by historical precedent. Colonel Charlie Beckwith had been hand picked to select, train, and equip Delta Force, which was declared a national asset just days prior to the seizure of the embassy in Iran (Beckwith, p. 162-166). Delta Force had no combat record or operational history. The name Delta Force meant nothing to most in the Defense Department, and even those who knew of its existence knew little of its capabilities. With no other qualified pool of individuals to choose from, Colonel Beckwith was given full responsibility and authority to plan, train for, and execute the assault on the embassy. There was not another component of any of the services which even claimed to be capable of accomplishing what Colonel Beckwith was claiming Delta Force could do. Delta was still in its formative phase, and Colonel Beckwith was in a position to develop the first generation of operators. Wilson compares this rare opportunity to "imprinting," where "the will of a strong personality and a forcefully expressed vision of what the organization should be" is able to affect the first

generation of operators in a way that profoundly affects succeeding generations (Wilson, p.96).

In contrast to Delta Force, the Navy and the Air Force were responsible for delivering the assault force into the area of operations. The decision-making environment for these components was quite different. By the late seventies, the conventional forces were experiencing the peak of what has since been labeled the "hollow force" syndrome of diminished budgets, low morale among the forces, and lingering poor public sentiment over the recent Vietnam experience. What assets were available were dedicated to countering Cold War threats, and were ill-prepared to confront a low-intensity conflict scenario. The dominant culture in the Air Force was that of Strategic Air Command, which was steeped in images of long range bombers, inter-continental ballistic missiles, nuclear deterrence, and the notion of "total war." The Air Force had been trying to get out of the low-intensity conflict business, and had dispersed, dismissed, or moth-balled most of its special operations capabilities, including its most qualified special operations pilots. The Navy and the Marines were no better prepared to deliver a strike force to a distant target. For these reasons, the Air Force and Navy faced a severe test in terms of gathering the personnel and equipment required for the enormously complex task they faced..

The senior leadership of the armed services, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and their staff, were in the tenuous position of planning an operation which they initially doubted they could pull off, at a time when the military could ill-afford another public relations blow. When General Vaught asked Colonel Beckwith the probability of success of the initial rescue plan, his answer was "zero," adding that the risk involved was "99.9%"

(Beckwith, p.177). The Joint Chiefs were all too aware that the military truly needed a successful operation, not merely for its own morale, but to restore public confidence, and to prevent the continued trend of shrinking budgets.

Undoubtedly, the most precarious decision-making environment existed for the key members of the Carter Administration in the executive branch, from President Carter himself to his foreign policy advisors. As President Carter recalled, “1980 was pure hell...it was one crisis after another” (Jordan, p.7). The Carter Administration had had their backs to the wall for three full years. Hamilton Jordan captured the sentiments of the American public well, when he summarized their reaction to the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran as:

Their rage, their very presence, seemed to be saying,  
*We've had enough! After Vietnam and OPEC price increases  
and gasoline lines, we've had enough. This is the last straw—Americans  
held hostage by a bunch of terrorists. We won't stand for it anymore!*  
(Jordan, p.37)

President Carter and his staff were well aware of the fact that not only would Carter's re-election be hanging in the balance, but history might truly judge him by his success or failure with regard to the hostage situation. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was particularly concerned that decisions made regarding the hostage situation would begin to show desperation, and he warned other staff members not to forget that “in the long run, the President will be judged by whether or not we get those Americans back safely and alive” (Jordan, p.53). Throughout the agonizing process, Secretary of State Vance would remain alone in voicing his opposition to the rescue operation, but would continue to try to illuminate the forces which he felt were driving the Carter administration toward defective decision-making.

These are the conditions under which the Defense Department and the executive branch developed a rescue plan. Initially, there was no doubt that the rescue option was a last resort. And yet somehow, months later, it seemed the best possible solution.

#### **D. Orchestrating the Hostage Rescue Mission**

Throughout my research regarding the hostage rescue fiasco, I reviewed articles which attempted to address why the mission failed. Generally, the accounts began no more than three days prior to the moment the mission was aborted, and some only covered the 24 hours during which the attempt was executed. Those written in the immediate aftermath were quick to claim that the mission failed because of mechanical problems encountered en route; there were only five operational helicopters at Desert One and the plan called for six. To me, that is like saying the plane crashed because it hit the ground. Even those involved with planning at the highest levels cited “a maze of missed opportunities mixed with incredibly bad luck” (Kyle, p.5). However, an in-depth look at the decisions which brought the rescue force to Desert One reveals that while this was a high risk operation, there were proposals made along the way directed at minimizing the risk. In his account of the rescue attempt, Colonel Jim Kyle claims that “fate dealt us a hand so full of problems that it finally overwhelmed us” (Kyle, p.5). The real tragedy is that there were many other ways those cards could have been played.

As discussed in section B, an ad hoc committee was formed to develop a rescue plan. From the outset, this organization faced seemingly insurmountable obstacles. While Delta Force was left to plan its portion of the operation on its own, the task force concentrated on developing ways to get the assault force and its equipment into Iran, and then back out. From day one the task force was advised that operational security must be

*the* top priority for the working group (Kyle, p.32). The group was also advised that for geopolitical reasons, seven countries in the region were off limits in terms of providing forward operating bases, including Turkey, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain. While there was not open opposition to the restrictions passed on by the Army Chief of Staff, the planners did wonder, "if the rescue mission was so critical to our national interest, why were roadblocks being thrown up before we even got started?" (Kyle, p.21). The question begs further explanation, and will be addressed in the analysis of these events.

The task force was faced with the knowledge that while the rescue option was considered a "last resort" there was also an urgent need for planners to devise some sort of fast-action plan to get the hostages out in the event that the terrorists began to execute Americans. The risks involved with throwing together a spur-of-the-moment rescue operation were daunting not only because of the dispersed nature of the aircraft needed to support the operation, but because of the absolute intelligence vacuum which existed at the moment the embassy fell. Not a single human intelligence asset present in Iran at the moment the crisis kicked off could be utilized due to the extremely tenuous political situation inside the country. Planners scrambled to locate the embassy building plans, identify anyone who had recently returned from Tehran and could provide information regarding the layout of the city, and to reprogram satellite systems to try and obtain photographic verification of what intelligence they could gather. On a positive note, General Gast had been in Iran several months earlier as the senior military advisor, and was able to provide general information as well as the names of some recent returnees. At this point, the biggest intelligence source was the media coverage from outside the embassy. It was not until late November, when 13 hostages were released, that the



planners learned that there were three Americans being held in the Iranian Foreign Ministry Building (Beckwith, p.180). As a result of the piecemeal nature of intelligence gathering, the rescue plan was constantly evolving. What the planners needed most was time to build reliable intelligence estimates, to put the pieces of the plan together, and to rehearse the operation.

With the knowledge that the United States had no intelligence assets in Iran, there were a number of people who wanted to ask their special operations counterparts in allied countries for assistance. Requests to use these networks were flatly refused by the JCS, who felt that since these people were in highly visible positions their involvement would draw attention to the fact that planning was underway, making it even more difficult to conceal the operation (Kyle, p.34). This response baffled planners, who knew this would make planning even more difficult. It was generally accepted that deceiving the special operations people scattered throughout the services would be both highly unlikely and frustrating because these were the very people who were trained to be able to pull these type of operations off without drawing attention. Some of the best minds in the business were left on the sidelines (Kyle, p.34). The staff even received an offer of assistance from German intelligence sources who were entering Tehran as a news team. Their assistance was refused by the JCS due to the political sensitivities of involving a foreign government (Beckwith, p.199).

Preparations for a rescue operation began, based on whatever information could be scraped together. When Colonel Beckwith determined that he would need 75 assault force members to accomplish the assault (this number eventually grew to 90), the air component began to tackle the problem of getting them there. Early on, it became clear

that a helicopter supported operation presented the best prospect of getting Delta in and out of Tehran (Kyle, p.34). The RH-53D model helicopter was selected since it was the largest transport helicopter which could fit below the deck of an aircraft carrier (a key consideration was concealing the helicopters below deck to avoid compromising the mission). At the time, the RH-53D was a Navy helicopter, primarily used for minesweeping. However, the Air Force had similar models, and a fully qualified helicopter pilot would have needed no more than two weeks familiarization training in the Navy version of the aircraft. The issue of which pilots should fly the mission became the thorniest issue of the operation, and inevitably a major factor in its failure.

Since time was critical, the initial decision was to let the Navy pilots fly the Navy helicopters. On the surface, this seems reasonable. However, the rescue mission was of an entirely different nature than the operations the Navy pilots were used to flying. The Navy pilots were used to "flying from ship to shore" and flying minesweeping missions, a lot of constant speed, constant altitude flying in generally fair weather conditions (Knotts, 9 Jul 97). The rescue operation called for terrain-hugging flying at low altitudes and under completely blacked out conditions, something which the Navy pilots had never been required to attempt, let alone carry out for any extended period of time. There were a number of Air Force pilots on active duty, however, with extensive combat flying experience from the Vietnam War who were filling any variety of billets back in the United States, and who would have been well suited for the task. But the Navy pilots were tested first.

After a few days of training with Delta, one pilot refused to continue, and all but one was sent back to his unit. They simply were not cut out for the task. When the

planners requested to use the Air Force pilots for the mission, the JCS rejected the recommendation under the notion that hand-picking a number of individuals from various duty stations would draw attention to the mission and demand an explanation. The task force was directed to use Marine pilots, in the most controversial decision of the operation. After two sets of Marine pilots were tested and deemed inadequate, Colonel Kyle put in another request for the Air Force pilots, which he felt certain would be granted. Since the last group of Marines to arrive consisted of 20 personnel from the same unit, he assumed that the operational security concerns had been overcome, and that pulling six Air Force pilots from separate units would not present a problem (Kyle, p.121). However, his request was again rejected. Since no justification was given for this last denial, the operators concluded on their own that the decision to go with Marine pilots was based on the JCS desire to have all four services involved in the operation (Knotts, 9 Jul 97)(Anonymous interview, 30 Jun 97) (Beckwith, p.200). In all, the rescue force went through five sets of pilots while training for the operation, and the issue of the helicopter pilots' competence remained a delicate subject to the very end (Knotts, 9 Jul 97).

Because of the distances involved and the restrictions on forward operating bases, it became clear that the helicopters would have to refuel somewhere within Iranian air space. To further complicate matters, the Air Force C-130 fleet (a versatile aircraft with models for refueling, transport, close air support, and a variety of special operations capabilities) was scattered throughout the world. The helicopter training situation was resolved by having the pilots train with one set of helicopters, and by keeping the helicopters to be used for the mission stored on board the *USS Nimitz* which was

underway in the Indian Ocean. For the Air Force, however, there was no such option. Four aircraft would be needed to transport the assault force, the Army Ranger unit which was added to secure the rendezvous point, and all of their equipment to a designated location in Iran, as well as refuel the helicopters once they reached the as yet undetermined location. The C-130 aircraft were also required to fly in complete blackout conditions, and the crews needed to train with the other elements of the assault force.

Ideally, the aircraft, helicopters, and personnel could be moved to one training site and sequestered there until the operation either went forward, or a peaceful solution was reached. Planners identified a site capable of handling all of the units involved in the operation and providing conditions comparable to those expected in Iran. But permission to use the site was denied. This is a perfect example of warped priorities, or a failure to establish priorities. The planners were told that "national security priorities" precluded the use of the site (Kyle, p.73). While the source of this decision remains undisclosed, I again question the logic of this decision. Some attribute this decision to the belief that a rescue operation was not a serious consideration. Perhaps at the time of the initial request that was true, but the situation certainly changed. If the officers in charge of the planning felt that having the entire force at one site presented the ideal training conditions, then denying access to that site would have compromised the ultimate readiness of the rescue force. In hindsight, it is difficult to say whether a unified training site could have accomplished more than was accomplished without one. If anything, a unified training site would have enabled those less experienced personnel involved in the planning and execution of the operation to work on a daily basis with those personnel who did not have as much to learn (namely, Delta Force) and had a lot to

offer in terms of experience and lessons learned during past operations. The issue remains that a request was made, and it was flatly denied. The only justification for this decision could have been if the requested site was already being used to train a strike force to be used in some offensive maneuver against Iran, which at the time may have been considered a more effective option. If this was the case, I see no reason why this information could not have been declassified after the release of the hostages in response to criticisms regarding denying the training site to the rescue force.

The next piece in the puzzle was exactly how the helicopter force was going to be refueled. This issue initiated the most serious strategic debate of the operation. Ideally, the helicopters would have been able to conduct aerial refueling, and would not have had to stop along the route. But, at the time, the Navy's RH-53's did not have aerial refueling capability, which meant that the helicopters would have to land somewhere in Iran, refuel, and then take off again. Critics of this portion of the plan make the argument that this type of leap-frog operation comes from the traditional "old school" infantry mind set, and that the more legs of an operation, the greater the chance for the operation to be bungled. I agree that the more steps that need to be taken, the more chances to stumble, but the helicopters needed to refuel because of restrictions placed on planners regarding which locations could not be used as forward operating bases. If the leadership were committed to simplifying the plan as much as possible, they would have found a way to convince what allies we had in the region to allow us to use their air space and remote landing strips. The fact that approval was obtained to operate out of Oman months into the planning leads me to believe that perhaps it was possible, albeit not simple, to

negotiate access to a few more desirable routes of travel earlier in the planning. Instead, the planners were forced to choose from a list of less than optimal scenarios.

The first scenario tested involved air dropping a number of huge fuel bladders from the back of C-130's into a remote spot in the desert and then having the helicopters land, draw fuel from the fuel bladders, and then take off, abandoning the bladders in the desert. After many frustrating attempts to test this system, both Delta Force and the air planners realized this strategy was too prone to complications, and could not refuel the helicopters quickly enough. The only alternative left was to find somewhere in Iran where the helicopters and the C-130's could land, the helos could refuel on the ground from the C-130's, and all could take off and abandon the location. This operation too would have to take place at night, at a remote location which was suitable for landing transport aircraft, and was deep inside the territory of Iran.

While the planners searched the country of Iran for a suitable rendezvous point, the rescue force continued to train for the operation, with Delta Force shuttling back and forth between North Carolina and Arizona, where the helicopter pilots were training and the C-130 crews were cycling through. Approximately 12 Army Rangers were added to the operation and tasked with assisting Delta Force in securing the as yet to be determined airfield which would support the refueling operation. These troops would be transported into Iran with Delta Force on the C-130's, but would not proceed into Tehran for the assault.

Finally, the planners identified a location which they felt would be suitable as a stopover point. It was 265 nautical miles southeast of Tehran and 90 miles from any habitation. It was not known whether the desert floor could support the weight of a C-

130. It was not until the end of March, two months after the site was identified, that President Carter approved a clandestine operation into Iran to survey the site. An unmarked aircraft penetrated Iranian air space, landed at the proposed site, tested the soil, and observed traffic patterns in the area. The crew then put into place an infra-red light system visible only with night-vision equipment which, when activated, would mark the landing spot for incoming aircraft. They determined that the location was suitable for the refueling operation, with the only concern being a road located near the site, and designated the location as "Desert One." Traffic on the road appeared very light, however, and did not seem to interfere with the refueling plans (Beckwith, p.220). The clandestine operation also proved to be a meaningful test of the readiness and capabilities of the Iranian air defense system. The crew revealed that they were not picked up at all on the way to Desert One, but that they did think that they were picked up near the coast on the way out. It was later determined that the radar they had picked them up on the way out was from a Navy ship off the coast. This information would have a later impact on the operation (Kyle, p.233).

As stated previously, the helicopters to be used in the operation were not the same helicopters which participated in the training exercises and rehearsals. The helicopters identified to conduct the mission were aboard the aircraft carrier *USS Nimitz* in the Indian Ocean. As a result, the planners in Washington attempted to track the readiness of these helicopters from halfway around the world, which became a frustrating and unsettling experience. Initially, the carrier commander was told the helicopters were to conduct minesweeping operations, which the Pentagon decided would provide a good cover story for the increased helicopter activity on the carrier. And so the Navy flew the

helos for a few hours a day on "minesweeping" missions. The planners were concerned however, that the routine nature of this type of flying would not subject the helicopters to the difficult conditions they would face on the mission. They were further alarmed to find that only six helicopters were operational, as the other two were being cannibalized to provide spare parts to keep the other six airborne, since the carrier commander had apparently not been advised of the increased requirement from six to eight. As late as March, 1980, two of the helicopters remained unflyable due to parts shortages and mechanical problems (Kyle, p.177). When General Vaught requested a personal visit to the carrier to inspect the helicopters himself, the Admiral denied the request, an infuriating situation which in hindsight seems ludicrous. General Vaught voiced his concerns to the JCS over the state of readiness of the helicopter force, and over the "lip service" he felt he had been receiving regarding the "gold-plated" supply effort the Navy claimed to have going to get the remaining choppers in the air (Kyle, p.177). Clearly, the carrier commander needed his priorities re-established, but he was denied access to information which would have made the situation clearer.

When the planners had the scenario inside Iran established, they set about working backwards to move the force into place for the operation. Once again, the issue of which locations could be used to stage the forces became an issue. In desperation, the planners made another request to use Masirah, Oman, as a forward operating base, noting that they were simply out of options. Remarkably, General Vaught was able to gain approval, which Colonel Kyle declared, "the best news we've had in five months of planning" (Kyle, p.171). There is no discussion of why this decision was possible at this point, and not five months earlier, but it brings into question again, the denial of use of so



many other locations. Its quite possible that if the military declared the mission "impossible" without the use of certain locations, a more concerted effort at obtaining passage through certain sites may have been initiated. At any rate, the last piece of the puzzle was put in place, the planners were ready to move the force into place, and the forces had been training for five months in preparation for the rescue.

As April neared, the commanders realized that if the rescue did not take place soon, the forces would begin to lose their sharpness, and the days in Iran would be lengthening, which would compress the schedule of the night time operation. The JCS felt that even though the operation seemed "infeasible" initially, the problems which contributed to this estimate had been addressed, and viewed as surmountable and solvable (Ryan, p.96). After what they called a "long, hard look" the JCS were ready to propose to the President that the operation go forward.

#### **E. The Decision to Exercise the Rescue Option**

For five months, the Carter administration had pursued a diplomatic solution to the hostage situation. Every feasible angle of negotiation had been pursued, economic sanctions had been imposed, and attempts had been made through the United Nations to isolate Iran from the international community (Vance, p.377). The policy of the administration was to exhaust all diplomatic possibilities in an effort to guarantee the safe return of the Americans held in Tehran. Unfortunately, the internal power struggle going on in Iran made negotiations frustrating, as it became clear that those in a position to negotiate were not always in position to make good on their promises. Because of Iran's prominent role as an oil supplier, the United States was also finding it difficult to build a coalition among its allies willing to impose harsh economic sanctions on Iran.

And ultimately, any action the United States took in the region could further exacerbate tensions with the Soviet Union.

Throughout the crisis, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance recommended a policy of restraint, arguing that the hostages would be freed only when Khomeini had consolidated power and was certain that the foundations of an Islamic republic were in place (Vance, p.408). At this point, the hostages would be of no further value, having served their political purpose, and would be safely released. Vance also felt that in late April, the diplomatic effort had not been exhausted, for it was not until April 22, two days before the rescue attempt, that he was able to get assurances from European and Asian allies that effective May 17, they would apply sanctions against Iran unless decisive progress was made (Vance, p.408).

While Secretary Vance tried to convince the rest of the administration to be patient, frustration built around him. When General Pustay, assistant to the Chairman of the JCS, presented Hamilton Jordan with an update on the progress of the rescue planning, Jordan became convinced that it could work:

As I listened to General Pustay's presentation, I began to be convinced that maybe it would work. After months of waiting and hoping, negotiating and failing, here was a way to go in and snatch our people up and have the whole damn thing over! Not to mention what it would do for the President and the nation. It would prove to the columnists and our political opponents that Carter was not an indecisive Chief Executive who was afraid to act. It would bolster a world community that was increasingly skeptical about American power. A daring mission would right the great wrong done to our country and our citizens. (Jordan, p.229)

When Jordan asked Pustay if he was highly confident of the operation's chances of success, Pustay's answer was "No, sir. I would say at this point that we have confidence in the plan. To say that we are highly confident would be to ignore some of the risks and

obstacles” (Jordan, p.229). Pustay made it clear that the JCS were not recommending the operation, per se. They had been asked by the President to come up with a plan for a rescue mission, and they now had a plan which they felt had a reasonable chance for success. Jordan acknowledged that he could not even contemplate the thought of the operation not succeeding. He “wanted desperately for (the) Godforsaken crisis to be over and done with” (Jordan, p.229).

By the end of the first week in April, the hostage rescue option was beginning to get serious attention by the executive staff. Relations with Iran had been broken off, sanctions had been imposed, and still the administration felt it had no leverage against Khomeini. Jordan saw the rescue option as “the best of a lousy set of options” (Jordan, p.249). On April 11, 1980, President Carter called a noon meeting of his foreign policy group. At this meeting, he asked the Chairman, JCS, General David Jones to “outline the plans, the risks, the problems—and the prospects for success” (Jordan, p.250). An important element to note is that Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was not present at the meeting, which was hastily scheduled during his three-day vacation. Vance represented the lone voice of opposition to the military option, and his absence, in my opinion, was not coincidental. Warren Christopher was sitting in for Secretary Vance, and expressed his discomfort at speaking on his behalf. Predictably, Brzezinski strongly supported the plan, Secretary of Defense Brown and Hamilton Jordan supported what they felt was the best option, and CIA Director Stansfield Turner was cautiously optimistic of its chances (Jordan, p. 251). President Carter concluded the meeting by stating that he would explore the option further over the weekend.

When Monday arrived, Secretary of State Vance had returned from his vacation and was furious upon learning of the hastily called meeting which took place during his absence. After expressing his displeasure to President Carter, Carter gave Vance the opportunity to present his concerns regarding the operation to the National Security Council. Vance was convinced at the time that the decision to resort to the military rescue option "was wrong and that it carried great risks for the hostages and our national interests" (Vance, p.410). Vance felt the attempt would inflame anti-American sentiments, push the Iranians toward the Soviets, and endanger the few hundred Americans who had opted to remain behind in Iran. He expressed his concerns regarding the operation at another hastily-called foreign policy meeting, and asked once again that the group not exercise the rescue option, but continue to pursue diplomatic resolution. When he finished his presentation, President Carter asked for the group's reactions to Secretary Vance's concerns. Hamilton Jordan recalled an awkward silence in the room, as Secretary Vance scanned the room one by one, looking for support. President Carter then expressed his disagreement with Secretary Vance's assessment, and proceeded to ask General Jones more specific questions regarding the operation. It was decided that the President should receive a more specific briefing from the mission planners (Jordan, p.254).

On April 16, General Vaught, Colonel Beckwith and a few select task force members presented an operations briefing to President Carter and the foreign policy staff in the Situation Room. General Vaught identified getting in undetected and the helicopter operation as the most critical aspects of the operation. For over three hours, President Carter and his staff questioned the planners on the specifics of the operation.

Secretary Vance hardly spoke (Jordan, p.263). After the meeting, Vance expressed that he felt better about the operation, but noted that “generals will rarely tell you that they can’t do something. This is a complex operation and I haven’t forgotten the old saying from my Pentagon days that in the military, anything that can go wrong will go wrong” (Jordan, p.264). Brzezinski attributed Vance’s outlook to his being “the ultimate example of a good man who has been traumatized by his Vietnam experience” (Jordan, p.264). President Carter approved the rescue plan, and troop deployments began with April 24 designated as the execution date.

#### **F. Execution and Abort**

For the next week, troops, aircraft, equipment, and a command and control element were transported around the world to the designated staging area at Wadi Kena, Egypt. Aboard the *USS Nimitz*, the helicopter maintenance crews performed final checks on the RH-53s which would be transporting forces in and out of Iran. A final jump-off point was set up at Masirah, Oman, where Delta Force, the C-130 aircrews, Ranger forces, aircraft, and equipment make their final departure into Iran and to Desert One.

As the forces arrived and prepared for the mission, the commanders worked through the issues of integrating a force of this size and diversity. Lieutenant Colonel Kyle, deputy commander of air operations, found himself in overall command and control of the forces responsible for securing the airfield, but with little knowledge of their tactics. Even after a briefing by their commander, he decided to turn over command and control of these forces to Colonel Beckwith, who was more experienced at commanding ground forces (Kyle, p.227). Aboard the *USS Nimitz* the Palletized Inertial Navigation Systems (PINS) were being installed on the helicopters to assist with

navigation to Desert One. The Air Force system, which was not designed to be aligned on board a steaming ship, was needed by the Marine pilots for the difficult flight ahead.

Final intelligence briefings were given to the personnel at Wadi Kena and on the aircraft carrier. Both sites received favorable weather forecasts, with no mention of poor visibility along the route. The Iranian radar defense capabilities were also briefed. It had been determined that the bulk of defense capabilities were inoperative, and that after passing through the coastline, the forces would be out of range of any known radar. The requirement to fly low level was for navigational, not security, reasons. (Kyle, p.233) At this point, however, the helicopter pilots were reminded that during the covert operation into Iran earlier in the year, the pilots had encountered unknown radar at 3,000 feet, and that the best bet would be to remain close to the deck (Kyle, p.233). However, U.S. electronic warfare officers had determined that these signals were probably from U.S. ships off the coast, and not from Iranian sources. This information was known to the Air Force pilots, but apparently was not known by those aboard the *USS Nimitz*.

The final order to go was given on the afternoon of 24 April 1980. The forces had been flown from Wadi Kena to Masirah, Oman, that morning where the aircraft's fuel tanks were topped off. At dusk, the task force would depart their locations, with the transport aircraft first, and the helicopters departing the aircraft carrier shortly afterward. The aircraft would land at Desert One first and set up the airfield, and then the helicopters would land, refuel, and depart with Delta Force for the hide site. By early evening on the 24<sup>th</sup>, fourteen aircraft carrying the entire rescue force were airborne and en route to Desert One. The aircraft penetrated the Iranian coastline at 250 feet, with no sign of being detected. The helicopter force had made visual contact with the transport

aircraft, which pressed on ahead of them to the rendezvous at Desert One. About one hour into the flight, the helicopter pilots began to get unreliable readings from their navigation systems, but because visibility was clear, this did not pose an immediate navigation problem.

At this point, the lead C-130 observed what it knew only to be "something restricting visibility" in the night sky. For ten to fifteen minutes they passed through a "milky condition" which elevated the temperature inside the aircraft greatly, but did not pose a threat to navigation. The flight leaders determined that the condition was navigable, and that even the helicopters had sufficient on-board navigation systems to penetrate the "cloud" safely. Therefore, the decision was made not to break radio silence to report the reduced visibility (Kyle, p.247). When a second dust cloud was encountered, John Carney, who had gone on the covert reconnaissance mission to Desert One, advised the crew that the phenomena was called "haboob" by the Iranians, and that the CIA pilots had been briefed on the condition of "suspended dust" by the CIA intelligence branch, information which never made it to any of the Air Force weather reports or any of the mission intelligence briefings. The decision was made to send an encoded message to the helicopter crews to advise them of the reduced visibility, but the difficulty of sending the message from the aircraft in complete darkness and using an overly complex matrix system prevented the crew from being able to relay the information to the aircraft behind them (Kyle, p.251).

At this point, one of the helicopters experienced a mechanical blade fault indication, which was verified upon landing and inspecting the aircraft. The crew collected their gear and classified materials from their helicopter, boarded one of the

other helicopters, and proceeded to Desert One fifteen minutes behind the rest of the flight. The lead helicopter sent a secure message that two helicopters had landed, and one continued on, but did not give any information regarding the status of the aircrews, the location, or the nature of the emergency. The command center remained in the dark. Shortly afterward, the helicopters again sighted the flight of C-130s about 2,000 above them. While this made them question the need to be flying at 200 feet, they did not alter their altitude.

The helicopters entered the "haboob" about 300 miles from Desert One. They soon lost visual contact with the ground, and could barely keep visual contact with each other. The flight leader decided to turn around and get out of the dust, regroup, and attempt to plan the next move. However, only his wing man saw him turn around, leaving four of the helicopters continuing on in the dust, one trailing by fifteen minutes, and two turning back to regroup. A secure message was sent to the command center advising of reduced visibility, but the exact locations of the helicopters, which were not known even by the flight leader, were still unknown.

The lead aircraft landed at Desert One shortly before midnight, and immediately set about securing the airfield. Unfortunately, two vehicles were driving straight for the airfield, one a busload of Iranians which was finally stopped and taken captive by a roadblock team. The other vehicle did not acknowledge the warning shots of the Delta members and was blown up by the security force. The ensuing gasoline fire made the landing site visible for miles. However, because the secure radio the lead team brought was broken, they were unable to send a message back to the command center until the



other aircraft arrived. Though distracted by the fireball at the end of the runway, the remaining C-130s landed without incident.

With 145 miles to go to Desert One, the helicopter force continued to struggle. With seven helicopters still en route, a second helicopter encountered hydraulic problems which it hoped could be fixed at Desert One. And the helicopter with the senior Marine on board was experiencing mechanical problems as well. With multiple systems operating ineffectively, the crew weighed the choices of turning back to the *USS Nimitz* or attempting to climb out of the dust and risking detection by the Iranians. They had no knowledge that there were no longer eight helicopters in the flight. Without contact with the rest of the flight, and with the real possibility that they would run out of fuel on the way back, they opted to turn around and abort, leaving six helicopters limping ahead to Desert One. Because their radio was also inoperative none of the other helicopters knew what happened when the missing helicopter failed to emerge from the dust cloud. In all, the helicopters were strung out for miles and ninety minutes behind the command post's timetable.

Finally, the required six helicopters made it to Desert One. However, one of the helicopters was grounded by the helicopter flight commander as unsafe to fly. This decision left five helicopters remaining, one below the minimum set for the next leg of the mission. The information was relayed to the command center, and after considering the possibility of going forward with five, Colonel Beckwith stuck to the initial determination that six helicopters were the minimum, and aborted the overall mission. At this point, there was still a slim possibility that if the forces could extract from Desert One without being detected by the Iranian air defense system, another

attempt could be made the next day. Contingency plans existed for transporting the captured Iranian bus passengers with them back to Masirah, Oman, and returning them during the second attempt. (Knotts, 23 Oct 97) However, any hopes of a second attempt were dashed when during the scramble to abandon the site and depart Iran, one of the helicopter pilots lost control of his aircraft and crashed into one of the refueling aircraft on the ground, killing eight crew members, and setting off a chain of explosions. The remaining aircraft and personnel limped back to Masirah, Oman, the first stop on the long flight back to the United States.

## **CHAPTER 4: The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) Assault on the Branch-Davidian Complex at Waco, Texas**

### **A. Summary of Events**

In late May of 1992, the McClellan County Sheriff's Department informed the Austin, Texas, ATF office that suspicious United Parcel Service deliveries were made to residents of a compound known as Mount Carmel, a few miles outside of Waco, Texas. The contents of the shipments ranged from firearms and explosive materials to weapons components, and were of sufficient quantities to call for an ATF investigation. The ensuing investigation led ATF agents to gather evidence regarding both the contents of the shipments as well as the nature and intentions of the residents of Mount Carmel, and to determine if there were violations involving the manufacture of machineguns and/or destructive devices, to include bombs and grenades. (U.S. Department of Treasury, p.25)

The investigation led ATF agents to a religious cult known as the Branch-Davidians, and its leader, who since 1990 has been known as David Koresh. By interviewing former cult members, ATF began to build a profile of the organization, as well as to build evidence against its leader Koresh. ATF learned from former members of the extraordinary domination Koresh had over the lives of the cult members, as well as the degree of loyalty the cult members demonstrated toward their leader. They also learned that the illegal activity within the compound might have ranged from weapons violations to sexual and physical abuse of cult members by Koresh. By December of 1992, ATF had confirmed reports of gunfire around the compound, had seen evidence of armed guards walking the grounds, and had learned from reliable sources that Koresh was engaging in sexual activities with minors within the compound. The Texas

Department of Protective and Regulatory Services then sent a caseworker to the compound to investigate the allegations of child abuse. While the caseworker did not find evidence of sexual abuse, she did confirm that Koresh and his followers were making "preparations for an armed struggle." (U.S. Department of Treasury, p.30)

In January, 1993, ATF set up an undercover house to observe the activities on the compound, and to attempt to penetrate the group. A special agent from the ATF was able to enter the compound on a number of occasions, to attend Bible study with the cult members, and to speak with Koresh. Meanwhile, planners were working to devise a way to serve a search warrant on the compound, preferably when Koresh was away from the grounds. There were concerns that a siege of the compound might lead to a mass suicide by the cult members, and that an assault could bring law enforcement up against serious firepower from within the compound. By the end of January, the planners had determined that the nature of the compound made a siege very difficult, and settled on the option of a "dynamic entry," a surprise raid of the compound involving forced entry by ATF units specially trained to serve high-risk warrants. (U.S. Department of Treasury, p.53)

Over the next two weeks, the planners developed their plan in accordance with the ATF National Response Plan, and set about bringing the key players together for the execution of the raid. Efforts were made to coordinate their activities with local law enforcement agencies, to obtain contract services which would be needed the day of the raid, and to work with the local media, who were getting ready to run a series on David Koresh and the activities at Mount Carmel. The management level staff at ATF were briefed of the impending operation, and on February 25th, the U.S. Magistrate-Judge for

the U.S. District Court of the Western District of Texas issued an arrest warrant for David Koresh and a search warrant for the compound and an adjacent facility known as the Mag Bag.

On the morning of the 28<sup>th</sup> of February 1993, 76 ATF assault force members attempted a dynamic entry of the compound at Mount Carmel, only to be repelled by heavy gunfire from within the complex. After approximately 1 ½ hours of gunfire, ATF was able to make contact with cult members within the complex and negotiate a cease fire. The unsuccessful raid resulted in the death of four ATF agents, the wounding of an additional 20 ATF personnel by hostile fire, and the injury of 8 other ATF personnel. Agents killed three cult members, and an additional four members sustained injuries. (U.S. Department of Treasury, p.102-103)

Over the remainder of the day, ATF attempted to maintain a secure perimeter around the compound while evacuating and tending to its wounded personnel and providing higher headquarters with an account of the events which took place. The agents efforts to secure the perimeter of the compound were unsuccessful, and a number of cult members passed in and out of the residence throughout the day. Additional ATF special response teams (SRTs) were sent to relieve the personnel on scene, and assistance was requested of the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI). ATF Director Higgins, FBI Director William Sessions, and the staff at the National Command Center determined, at the recommendation of Incident Commander Chojnacki, that the FBI should assume command and control of the siege situation. By the March 2nd, the FBI had assumed both operational and tactical control over the situation, with the ATF remaining on scene in a peripheral role.

## **B. The Tasked Organization**

The case regarding the alleged activities on Mount Carmel was referred to the ATF by local law enforcement agencies in the Waco area. The allegations regarding the manufacturing of illegal automatic weapons and possibly explosive devices fall expressly within ATF investigative responsibilities. ATF's investigation was also thorough enough to obtain the requisite probable cause needed to procure search warrants. The ATF consulted numerous technical experts during the investigation which confirmed that the items received by members within the compound could very well be turned into dangerous and illegal weapons. There does not appear to be any evidence that ATF acted outside its jurisdiction, or that there was not sufficient evidence of federal violations by the Branch-Davidians to warrant the pursuit of David Koresh and his followers by the ATF (U.S. Department of Treasury, p.122-124).

The formation of the organization which would eventually execute the search warrants was more problematic. The raid on the Branch-Davidian compound was the first in ATF's history which was conducted within the framework of its National Response Plan (NRP), created to establish consistent policies with regard to integrating multiple SRTs. While the NRP "barely addressed critical issues such as how a major operation should be planned, it did establish a command structure for such actions and specify how positions within that structure were to be filled." (Department of the Treasury, p.152) The NRP mandated that an Incident Commander would be responsible for the overall strategy and writing of the operational plan, and the Tactical Coordinator would be responsible for directing and controlling all tactical and operational functions during an incident, upon the approval of the Incident Commander. The Special Agent in

Charge (SAC) of any given region is designated the Incident Commander for any major incident within that region, regardless of his experience, or lack thereof, within tactical operations. The SAC, in turn, appoints the Tactical Coordinator for a given incident, who must fill the NRP requirement of having completed SRT training. When multiple SRTs are involved in one operation, there will be Deputy Incident Commanders and Deputy Tactical Coordinators designated so that the various SRTs are represented in the planning organization. At any rate, the personnel assigned to these positions were designated based upon rank, not their level of experience, which arguably prevented some more qualified personnel from participating in the overall planning of the operation (U.S. Department of Treasury, p.153).

The organization responsible for planning the Waco raid was headed by Phillip Chojnacki, Special Agent in Charge (SAC) of the Houston Division who, by position, became the Incident Commander. Assistant SAC Chuck Sarabyn, also of the Houston division, was named the Tactical Coordinator. Sarabyn had attended the required SRT training, but only as an observer, and he lacked experience in planning tactical operations of this scale. Because of the qualifications specified in the NRP, few candidates were eligible to fill the position, and administrative requirements made many of the more qualified personnel ineligible. The one participant in the operation who appeared to have directly relevant experience was relegated to the position of joint command of one of the SRTs, as he did not have the requisite seniority or administrative qualifications to fill the role of a tactical coordinator (U.S. Department of Treasury, p.154).

Unlike military planning staffs, the ATF organization does not break out responsibilities within the planning staff. There is not a separate intelligence officer,

logistics officer, personnel officer, communications officer, or operations officer. Therefore, there was no one person at the planning level who was the primary focal point for gathering and disseminating intelligence. An agent whose sole responsibility was processing intelligence may have done a better job pointing out the unreliability of some of the information which served as a basis for important tactical decisions. The individual responsible for running the undercover house, gathering intelligence, monitoring the compound, and deciding whether the operation should be aborted did not have the rank or status to effectively influence the flow of events during the final days of preparations, and there was no one at the level of the incident planners who was knowledgeable enough of the intelligence situation to recommend alternative courses of action.

### **C. The Decision-Making Environment**

By the early 1990's, following a review of its capabilities and limitations, the ATF decided to expand its ability to manage tactical incidents by forming what became known as special response teams (SRTs). Members of these teams are volunteers who are sent to attend a specialized training program, which in 1991 became centrally located at Fort McClellan, Alabama, the home of many of the Army's law enforcement-related training programs. The mandatory two-week training seminar includes instruction in tactics, physical fitness, firearms training, and operational planning. SRT personnel are also required to attend 24 hours of training each quarter with the rest of their team, most often at a location within their district. Much of this training is conducted jointly with other local law enforcement agencies, whose Special Weapons and Tactics (S.W.A.T.)



teams generally follow similar training patterns (U.S. Department of Treasury, Appendix B-39).

By early 1993, the two year old SRT program had demonstrated its worth to the leadership at the Justice Department. The SRTs were activated 443 times to handle the most dangerous cases, including providing assistance at the riots in Los Angeles in 1992, and to assisting local law enforcement agencies in Idaho with capturing homicide suspects. Prior to the Waco operation there had been only one SRT member injured by gunfire. (U.S. Department of Treasury, Appendix B-40) The only comparable operation in ATF's history was a 1985 siege by ATF and FBI agents at a 360-acre Arkansas compound involving a white-supremacist group. The federal agents established a perimeter around the facility and after three days of negotiations, the residents within the compound surrendered peacefully, but not before destroying much of the evidence on the property. Only William Buford, Resident Agent in Charge of the Little Rock ATF office, was present at the Arkansas siege as well as the raid at Waco.

Along with the growing confidence of ATF's agents who had participated in many successful small-scale operations was an increasingly close relationship between ATF and the media. By the early 1990's, the American media was intensely focused on crime and law enforcement activities. Many leading stories in both local and national newspapers dealt with crime-related issues. The television show C.O.P.S. was gaining popularity, and law enforcement activities were a common sight on prime time television. Along with many other civilian law enforcement agencies, ATF had selectively invited the media to participate as observers while warrants were served and to report on the agency's level of activity. But, during preparations for the raid at Waco,

ATF's efforts to effectively build a case against David Koresh and plan a large-scale tactical operation oftentimes conflicted with the media's tendency to place the "public's right to know" ahead of the priorities of ATF (U.S. Department of Treasury, Appendix B-73 - B-75). A published article about the compound may have encouraged Koresh to destroy much of the evidence that ATF was counting on finding when they served the warrant. But Waco's local newspaper hoped that publishing an article would force a more thorough investigation of what was allegedly going on at Mount Carmel. Without knowledge of the extent of ATF's investigation, this does not appear to be an unreasonable line of thinking.

As the planning for the operation progressed, the leadership remained confident in the ability of the SRTs to confront the threat from within the Branch-Davidian complex. To date, most suspects apprehended by ATF had been taken in early dawn raids, ideally while sleeping, but at any rate at a time when resistance is least likely, and when surprise is potentially greatest. But the past successes against suspects with lesser skill and questionable will may have actually led to overconfidence in tactics which were not sound enough when tested against more dedicated, more competent opposition. In an operation as large as the one at Waco, when there is more stress on personnel and processes, flaws which were probably present in many past smaller ATF operations, were finally exposed and were too great to overcome.

#### **D. Orchestrating the Raid**

By the fall of 1992, ATF had revealed enough evidence of illegal activity at the compound to substantiate requesting and executing a search warrant. The agents at the Houston office recognized that the warrant would be quite a challenge to execute, and Assistant SAC Chuck Sarabyn organized a team of planners who had experience in SRT operations. Seven people planned every aspect of the operation. They all had extensive experience inside ATF executing high risk law enforcement warrants, and a few had some military experience. As mentioned earlier, only one member of the planning group had participated in the operation comparable to the task presented by the scenario at Waco. Along with the Houston ATF office, the Dallas SRT and New Orleans SRTs were represented on the planning staff.

In early December, the planners received an initial briefing by ATF Special Agent David Aguilera, who had conducted the investigation into David Koresh and the Branch-Davidians to this point. Aguilera told planners to expect approximately 75 members to be present at the compound at any given time, including women and children. He also reviewed the physical layout of the compound, the features of the main buildings, and the general nature of the terrain surrounding the facility. Aguilera suggested that ATF set up surveillance of the compound, noting that his information was somewhat dated, and that his knowledge of the daily routines of the residents was incomplete. Following Aguilera's briefing, the SRT leaders on the planning staff set about determining the best way to execute the warrant, which ultimately became a choice between a dynamic assault of the compound and a siege.

When members of the planning staff drove to Waco in late December they were leaning toward conducting a siege. Ideally, they would trap David Koresh away from the compound, and then lay siege to Mount Carmel in his absence. They hoped that the leaderless Branch-Davidians would give up peacefully. However, the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services related to ATF that Koresh rarely left the compound. This information, combined with their inspection of the terrain outside the compound and the potential firepower within the compound, led planners to question the potential for success of a siege. (The siege following the failed raid actually validated the notion that a siege would not lead to a quick, non-confrontational outcome.) By January, planners were still discussing both options, and felt additional information was necessary. At this point, the decision was made to set up an undercover operation near the complex (U.S. Department of Treasury, p. 44).

As interviews of former residents at the compound continued, speculation regarding the types of weapons inside the compound was confirmed. Former members also told of Koresh's habit of keeping some individuals armed at all times, and of his desire to prepare the members for an armed confrontation with law enforcement. However, former members were not able to confirm whether Koresh had actually trained his followers in methods of resistance. Accounts that Koresh might respond to a siege by leading a mass suicide further complicated the situation. Even if a mass suicide were not initiated, interviews revealed that the compound was well stocked with months of supplies. Planners were able to gain information about the daily routines of the cult members with regard to worship services, the Saturday Sabbath, the on-going

construction project adjacent to the main compound, and the location of the living quarters within the complex (U.S. Department of Treasury, p. 46).

By mid-January the undercover operation was set up in a residence adjacent to the compound where eight ATF agents conducted surveillance of the compound. However, the location of the house did enable the agents to monitor all of the compound's entrances and exits. The undercover agents were told to determine whether the compound had armed guards, to identify and count residents, to determine whether the cult members were conducting counter-surveillance, and to document any evidence of federal firearms violations. None of the members of the undercover operation were part of the tactical planning, nor were they given guidance on what kind of information the tactical planners were looking for. Furthermore, they were not advised of changes in the tactical plan (U.S. Department of Treasury, p. 52).

Without clear guidance, and with little follow-up supervision, the undercover operation quickly degraded into a half-hearted operation. After just eight days of around-the-clock coverage, the undercover agents began to question their responsibilities and the significance of what they could observe. In response to the complaints of the undercover agents at the house, SAC Sarabyn directed them to terminate 24-hour surveillance of the compound and to focus on infiltrating the complex. The undercover agents' only communication with the tactical planners was via a surveillance log, photographs, and videotapes given to planners by a contact agent. But the majority of the photographs taken from the undercover house were not even developed until long after the raid, and few of those that were developed were studied. The tactical planners saw no videotape, and there was no one agent responsible for collecting the information from the

surveillance logs and processing it for the planners. (U.S. Department of Treasury, p. 52-53). Interviews of the tactical planning staff after the raid revealed that they believed that the undercover operation was never anything but a 24-hour-a-day operation, and were unaware that SAC Sarabyn knew otherwise (Department of the Treasury, Appendix B-59). At any rate, the piecemeal information which did reach the tactical planners during the first three weeks of the undercover operation was assumed to be reliable by the planners, and became the foundation upon which planners drew conclusions and formulated a tactical plan for an assault of the complex.

Based on the questionable information gathered by the so-called undercover operation, ATF planners drew the following conclusions. First, there were no armed guards on the premises. This was decided even though the UPS delivery man had related to agents that he had been stopped by armed guards while making deliveries to the compound, and in spite of former members' accounts of the presence of armed guards on the premises. Second, planners concluded that Koresh rarely, if ever, left the compound. And lastly, they concluded that most of the men worked on the construction of the pit next to the main building beginning at 10:00 a.m. This conclusion was made even though the undercover house made only sporadic entries in their log with regard to the men working in the pit. In fact, for the majority of the time when the tactical plan was devised, there was no mention of men working in the pit. The undercover house conducted surveillance a total of 36 days, and noted men working in the pit during only 14 of these days (U.S. Department of Treasury, p.145-146). However, these details were somehow not properly conveyed or their significance not sufficiently understood by the

tactical planners. With these assumptions made, the planners set to work on the details of a tactical assault of the compound, to be conducted at 10:00 in the morning.

SAC Sarabyn and four SRT leaders worked on the tactical plan for two weeks. There was no clear division of planning responsibilities within the group, and all worked simultaneously to account for all of the operational and support elements. Aside from the execution of the plan, steps were taken to procure hotel rooms for the arriving out-of-town personnel, emergency medical services were contracted, helicopter support was finessed from the Texas National Guard, and local law enforcement agencies were consulted and integrated into the overall scheme. A staging area was identified for the forces to assemble the morning of the raid, and transportation plans were outlined for traveling from this site to the compound.

According to the tactical plan, approximately 75 assault force members would gather at the assembly point and travel to the compound in cattle trailers, presumably to keep a low profile. At the same time, a helicopter force would depart from a nearby airfield and create a diversion at the far end of the compound. The agents would deploy from the trailers on the opposite side of the compound and conduct a three-point assault of the main structure. The New Orleans SRT was responsible for climbing onto the Compound's roof, assaulting the arms room and Koresh's private quarters, and securing the base of this portion of the complex. The Dallas SRT was responsible for entering the front door and securing the second and third floor quarters, presumably those of the women and children. The Houston SRT was split, with half of the team entering the front door and securing the first floor men's quarters, while the other half of the team

secured the men who were supposedly working in the pit (U.S. Department of Treasury, p.59).

All of the agents would be carrying semi-automatic handguns, and some of the agents carried AR-15 rifles or 9mm MP-5 sub-machineguns. In addition to the assault force, there would be two forward observer teams positioned on the complex's perimeter to observe any activity the morning of the raid, and to provide cover fire for the assault force if needed. An additional contingent of agents was responsible for securing the perimeter during and after the raid. When the raid of the main complex was executed, additional agents would serve a warrant on the Mag Bag, which was presumed to be a storage facility.

While these plans were never formally put into writing prior to raid, the planners did act in accordance with ATF's NRP. Requests for additional SRT personnel did flow through the appropriate channels. On February 11<sup>th</sup>, SAC Sarabyn flew to Washington to brief ATF's senior leadership. After hearing the plans for the operation, the leadership raised several specific concerns with regard to the safety of the agents, the decision not to go with a pre-dawn raid, as well as the contingency abort options. Sarabyn allayed the concerns of the leadership and was given the authority to go forward with the planned operation.

It is necessary at this point to digress and elaborate upon the situation which was developing between ATF and the media in Waco. Even prior to ATF's investigation of the activities at Mount Carmel, the *Waco Tribune-Herald* had been conducting its own investigation of David Koresh and the Branch-Davidian cult. ATF was advised in the fall of 1992 that the newspaper was working on a story. By February, a story was prepared



for publication and forwarded to the paper's parent company in Orlando, Florida, for a recommendation on whether security precautions were needed in the event that the cult members tried to retaliate against the paper. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of February, with the knowledge that a story was pending, SAC Sarabyn and an ATF agent from the Austin office met with the managing editor of the *Waco Tribune-Herald* to request that the paper delay publication of the story. They offered to let the paper observe the pending law enforcement activities first-hand, if they agreed not to publish the article. The editor was advised that the actions would take place in two to four weeks, and she responded by stating that her superiors would have to make the decision whether to publish.

When ATF later advised the paper of the tentative date of the raid, they were advised that the paper had not decided whether or not to publish the article. As the month progressed, the paper continued to work toward publishing, and ATF contemplated its next action. On the February 24th, three ATF agents involved in the raid planning met with the senior editors of the paper to attempt to come to an agreement. However, ATF failed to present the editors with what they felt was sufficient cause to delay publication. The need to remain vague regarding the specifics of the impending law enforcement operation led the newspaper to believe that the public's right to know the activities of the Branch-Davidians outweighed the possible risks to what appeared to them to be a tentative law enforcement operation. The inclination on the part of the newspaper to go ahead and publish the article in spite of its potential to agitate Koresh led the ATF leadership to accelerate its timeline in serving the warrant (U.S. Department of Treasury, p.67-71).

By the February 24th, the forward observer teams and assault force members had assembled at Fort Hood, an Army base in central Texas, to use their training facilities in preparation for the raid, which was tentatively scheduled for the March 1st. The ATF leadership had concluded that the *Waco Tribune-Herald* was going to begin publishing its series on Koresh on the February 28th, and decided to change the raid to that Sunday morning, in hopes of capturing Koresh before he became agitated over the nature of the newspaper article. On the 25<sup>th</sup> of February, ATF obtained the necessary search warrant from the U.S. Magistrate-Judge for the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Texas to arrest Koresh for violating firearms regulations, and to search the compound and the facility known as the Mag Bag.

Late on Friday the 26<sup>th</sup> of February, the *Waco Tribune-Herald* advised ATF that they would be running the story the next day. Because Saturday was the Branch-Davidian Sabbath and the men were not likely to be working in the pit, the operation was not moved up to Saturday. Instead, an undercover agent from the surveillance house would be sent into the compound Saturday morning to evaluate Koresh's reaction to the article. Since the 17<sup>th</sup> of February, surveillance activities at the undercover house had ceased altogether--even though this is when they were needed the most--and the agents there concentrated on penetrating the compound and establishing contact with Koresh and the residents of the compound (U.S. Department of Treasury, p.146).

On the Friday before the raid, the Treasury Department Office of Enforcement was notified of the plans to conduct the raid. After meeting to discuss the pending operation, the Treasury department staff contacted the Director of ATF to express grave concerns over the planned operation (U.S. Department of Treasury, p.75). At the time,

there was no written requirement for the Office of Enforcement to be advised of the impending raid. This action was left to the discretion of the ATF bureau head. With only 48 hours to review and comment on the operational plans, the Office raised a number of questions, but eventually gave in to the assurances of the ATF agents. By Saturday, the Treasury Department assured ATF that they would permit the raid to go forward.

On Saturday morning, preparations began to execute the search warrant. ATF agents moved into the area and began to set up the rendezvous location at a nearby college. Last minute logistical requirements were finalized, and in place times were confirmed. By the afternoon, the local media had pieced together that the raid was going to occur the next day. For one, a Fort Worth medical transport service had been placed on stand-by for Sunday morning. An ambulance dispatcher also leaked to the media that they had been advised the operation would be Sunday morning. By Saturday evening, every media network in Waco was poised to attend the next day's operation at Mount Carmel.

As planned, Special Agent Rodriguez was sent into the compound Saturday morning from the undercover house to observe Koresh's reaction to the newspaper article about the activities at the compound. During morning worship, Koresh referred to the article, and told his followers that "they were coming for him," but made no specific reference to ATF, and no preparations were made after the services for resistance to forceful law enforcement action (U.S. Department of Treasury, p.80). Phillip Chojnacki, Special Agent in Charge of the Dallas Office and the Incident Commander, directed Special Agent Rodriguez to go back into the house Sunday morning for a final appraisal

of Koresh's state of mind. Rodriguez protested, worrying over being able to leave the house by the time of the raid and whether Koresh would be suspicious over his unexpected return. Chojnacki was unmoved, and preparations continued for the 10:00 a.m. raid.

#### **E. The Decision to Go Forward With the Raid**

On Sunday morning, observers at the undercover house indicated that nothing seemed out of the ordinary at the compound. The agents training at Fort Hood departed at dawn for Waco, and arrived at the staging area in an 80-vehicle convoy just before 8:00 a.m. At 8:00, SAC Sarabyn assembled the agents who had begun to mill around the facility for a short briefing, reviewing responsibilities, addressing the recent media developments, and advising the personnel that a final briefing would be conducted after Special Agent Rodriguez returned from the compound.

Meanwhile, the media began to arrive at the scene. By 7:30 the first media vehicles took up positions at intersections surrounding the compound. Some reporters mistakenly expected to be stopped at police roadblocks, which were not going to be established until after the operation was underway. The undercover house reported the increase in vehicle traffic back to Jim Cavanaugh, Sarabyn's Deputy Tactical Coordinator, but it is not known whether this information ever made it back to the then up and running command post (U.S. Department of Treasury, p.84). By 8:30, one of KWTX's cameramen was lost on one of the compound's perimeter's roads, and asked a passing letter carrier in a U.S. Mail vehicle for directions to "Rodenville," the local name for the compound. After receiving directions, the cameraman then warned the letter carrier that some type of law enforcement action, possibly a raid, was about to take place

at the complex. Unknown to the cameraman, the letter carrier was one of Koresh's followers, and immediately returned to the compound to relay this information to Koresh (U.S. Department of Treasury, p.85).

Special Agent Rodriguez returned to the compound as directed at 8:00 on Sunday morning. During a bible study session, Rodriguez witnessed the letter carrier enter the room and ask Koresh to take a telephone call. When Koresh returned to the room, he was visibly upset. Unable to continue the bible study session, he mumbled comments to Rodriguez to the effect that neither the ATF or National Guard would get him. He followed this with, "They're coming, Robert, they're coming..." (U.S. Department of Treasury, p.89). Concerned that the raid had already begun, Rodriguez quickly managed to depart the complex and hasten back to the undercover house.

Upon arriving at the undercover house, Rodriguez reported what he witnessed to Cavanaugh, and then by telephone to Sarabyn at the command post. Although Rodriguez reported no cult members were seen preparing for an armed defense, and that he did not see any weapons before he departed, he clearly communicated that Koresh knew that a raid was imminent. (U.S. Department of Treasury, p.90) SAC Sarabyn concluded that since no known preparations were being made inside the compound for an armed resistance that, if they hurried, the raid could still be executed. After discussing the situation with the Incident Commander, Chojnacki went along with Sarabyn's recommendation, and directed that the raid proceed immediately.

Sarabyn returned to the staging area at 9:10 and told personnel that Koresh knew ATF was coming and that they needed to hurry. As a result, no final briefing was given to the assault force, and there was no further discussion of the information Rodriguez had

forwarded. Several agents later reported having reservations about the raid going forward, but that they did not feel it was appropriate to question the leadership decision. Within 15 minutes, the special response teams had loaded up and departed for the compound. Sarabyn again contacted the undercover house, who reported no visible activity at the compound. Rodriguez became visibly distraught upon discovering that the raid was going forward, and repeatedly questioned how the raid could go forward.

The cult members inside the compound were, in fact, preparing to resist. Many of the cult members armed themselves, donned body armor or ammunition vests, and moved the women and children away from the exterior walls of the compound. Forty minutes had elapsed since Koresh received word of the impending raid, enough time for the cult members to take up positions at the windows of the complex and await the arrival of the federal agents.

#### **F. Execution and Withdrawal**

The plan rested on a threefold premise—first, the men would be working in the pit when the assault progressed; second, the federal agents would have the element of surprise; and third, the helicopters would divert the compound residents away from the arriving assault forces. The first two elements had already been compromised at the time the decision was made to expedite the raid. Because the agents had been ordered to “hurry up” the third element too fell by the wayside. The helicopters departed from a separate staging area than the personnel transported in the cattle trailers, and could not make up the difference in travel time to the compound. As a result, the trailers carrying the ATF personnel had already entered the compound’s exterior gates when the helicopters arrived on scene.

When the three helicopters were within 350 meters of the compound, they began taking fire from the cult members. Two of the helicopters were forced to land and inspect the damage incurred. By this time, it was too late for the helicopter personnel to direct the ground personnel to abort the operation. To make matters worse, the Incident Commander, SAC Chojnacki was on board one of the helicopters, which effectively eliminated his ability to exert command and control over his assaulting forces. All three helicopters withdrew from the area, and SAC Chojnacki was forced to monitor the remainder of the operation from the rear.

Agents in the arriving assault force noticed that no members were outside, and correctly interpreted this as a bad sign. As the agents began exiting the trailers at the front of the compound, Koresh himself appeared at the front door and asked, "What's going on?" When the agents identified themselves and their intent to serve a search warrant, Koresh slammed the door and retreated into the complex. Almost immediately after the door was slammed shut, a barrage of gunfire erupted from inside the door toward the approaching assault force. The gunfire spread to the adjoining windows, covering both the Dallas and Houston SRTs, and disabling the first two vehicles in the column (U.S. Department of Treasury, p.96).

The New Orleans SRT moved into position on the east side of the compound on its way to assault the second floor arms room and private quarters of Koresh. Soon after reaching the roof, they too came under heavy gunfire. Two agents were killed, one was severely wounded and pinned down inside the complex's center courtyard, and the remaining five team members were forced to retreat back to a safer position near the wall

of the compound. Facing an overpowering amount of firepower, the federal agents could do no more than take cover and wait for the firing to stop.

Unable to retreat over the open terrain, and facing an opponent who was able to fire indiscriminately and with heavy volume, the ATF agents were pinned down along the exterior of the compound. During the raid four agents were killed, twenty received gunshot or shrapnel wounds, and eight more incurred other injuries. The cult members suffered only three casualties. As the initial firefight progressed, ATF agents at the undercover house repeatedly attempted to make contact with someone inside the compound to negotiate a cease fire. Fortunately, one of the frightened cult members inside the compound had dialed 911 and spoken to Sheriff's Deputy Larry Lynch, but soon hung up the phone. Using the number provided by the 911 system, the Deputy Lynch was able to call back. When a cult member finally answered the phone, Deputy Lynch attempted to negotiate a cease fire, relaying information from inside the compound to the ATF leadership at their command post. Agents at the undercover house continued to make no progress getting a cult member inside to answer the phone, until they got assault force members around the compound to yell to some cult members to answer the phone. With no direct radio link from the undercover house to the assault force members, the word to cease fire was passed by mouth to the team leaders, who then relayed the information to their team members. Between the efforts of the Sheriff's office and the undercover house, a cease fire was eventually negotiated. Nearly two hours after initiating the assault, ATF agents were permitted to recover their dead and wounded agents and retreat back to the perimeter. Since there had been no discussion of a rally point or retrograde movement plan, the retreat was disorganized and further



demoralizing. It was nearly 1:00pm when the withdrawal was complete (U.S. Department of Treasury, p.105-107).

In the chaos that followed the initial assault, ATF had to take care of its casualties, maintain a perimeter around the complex, and handle the media. Unfortunately, a number of cult members penetrated the perimeter, initiating sporadic bursts of gunfire around the complex. Back at the command posts, the leadership relayed the situation back to the leadership in Washington, and requested additional assistance. Over the next 24 hours, additional ATF agents arrived from around the country, and the Justice Department decided the FBI should take over what was now a siege scenario. Over the next three days, the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team members relieved the bitter and demoralized ATF agents from their posts around the compound, relegating them to positions around the perimeter and effectively taking over control of the operation (U.S. Department of Treasury, p.117-118).

## **CHAPTER 5: Analysis**

A number of common factors in the final fate of the operations emerge in the case studies. In both cases, the culture of the organizations affected how those factors played themselves out. Within the environment of each organization's culture, there are other areas which stand out as contributing to the eventual failure of the operations. By breaking down the common themes of both of these fiascoes, one can more clearly see the direct impact these factors had on the end result.

### **A. Organizational Culture**

While there is no shortage of existing theory on organizational culture, there is no generally accepted conceptual framework for examining organizational culture. For the purpose of this analysis, I follow James Q. Wilson's depiction of organizational culture as an organization's personality, which can undergo change, but which does so slowly, over time. My analysis presents a view of organizational culture as involving subcultures, as opposed to the view that an organization's culture encompasses one uniform set of values which are shared throughout (Martin and Meyerson, p.110). These subcultures can have a variety of relationships with one another, ranging from conflict to peaceful coexistence (Schultz, p.12).

The analysis here addresses three categories of subcultures: rational culture, political culture, and symbolic culture. A rational culture emphasizes formal roles and relationships, objectives, and policies. A political culture focuses on competition over scarce resources, where power and conflict dominate the nature of the relationship between individuals and organizations. Activities within the organization are characterized by negotiations, compromise, and coalition building. A symbolic culture

demonstrates a focus on rituals, ceremonies, heroes and myths to keep an organization together, as opposed to rules, leadership authority, and a focus on objectives (Bolman and Deal, p.5).

In the cases of the Iran hostage rescue attempt and the ATF raid at Waco, there were certainly subcultures at work within each organization. In both cases, the dominant subculture was not the culture with the strongest focus on reducing the risk inherent in these type of operations. As a result, each operation was conducted in a more risky environment than was absolutely necessary.

Historical accounts of these cases as well as interview material reflect a belief among participants in special operations that there is a specific culture which leads to more successful operations. This special operations "culture" most closely reflects a rational culture. Special operations demand a strong focus on objectives and what are known to be the best strategies for achieving those objectives because of the precision required to successfully complete these type of missions. (Knotts, 9 Jul 97) Very low priority is placed on activities that would be classified as reflecting a political or symbolic culture. Too much emphasis on activities which reflect a political or symbolic culture can actually compromise efforts to minimize the inherent risk of tactical operations, and jeopardize the lives of participants. The case studies demonstrate this notion.

In the case of the Iran hostage rescue attempt, the dominant culture was arguably political, with the rational culture of Delta Force struggling to emerge, and few instances of decisions reflecting a symbolic culture. The political culture of the military at the time did not prevent a sound strategy from emerging, but did prevent certain individuals

most capable of implementing that strategy from participating in the effort, and certainly involved some individuals who were not qualified to participate in an operation of this nature with critical elements of the implementation phase.

The military by the late seventies was dominated by Cold War thinkers, with the distinction between conventional and unconventional warfare boiling down to whether a scenario was non-nuclear or nuclear. The Air Force focused its attention on its long range bomber fleet, inter-continental missile program, and first strike capability. Air Force Special Operations were neglected in budget and equipment allocations, and in the degree to which their personnel were rewarded with promotions and opportunities to fill important command positions. From the outset of the Iran hostage situation, the Air Force leadership felt the mission fell outside the scope of their responsibilities. The truth, perhaps, is that it no longer fit within the scope of their capabilities. At the time of the crisis, the Air Force Special Operations fleet of aircraft was 25 years old, with thousands of miles of combat flying hours from the Vietnam War. The Special Operations mission itself was in danger of being pawned off to the Air National Guard and Reserve forces (Kyle, p. 23). The Special Operations mindset was not represented among the Air Force leadership responsible for responding to the Iran hostage situation. The Air Force would fill the airlift requirements for the operation, would provide refueling capability for the aircraft involved, and would provide tactical fighter support, if deemed necessary, but it would be up to the Navy or the Marines to deliver Delta to the area of operation. In the power struggle over scarce resources, the special operations community lost to the conventional warfare community, who were now left with leading

the planning and execution of what was clearly an unconventional operation. The resultant effect on Delta was clearly stated by one interviewee:

“Delta is like a scalpel. In a surgeon’s hands, they are a precise tool. In the hands on an untrained person, they’re no more useful than a butter knife” (Anonymous interview, 30 Jun 1997)

The Navy and the Marines also had a conventional mindset. The Cold War called for large carrier task forces with the ability to project large numbers of forces to faraway amphibious landing sites. Inserting small, specialized units deep into enemy territory was not a “conventional” Navy or Marine mission. Their helicopter pilots generally flew straight, level, ship to shore missions, or tedious, grid-oriented mine-sweeping missions. But their leadership did recognize that the Iran hostage situation presented an opportunity to restore public confidence in and foreign respect for the capabilities of the American military. The Army had its prized Delta force and the Air Force would certainly provide air support—the Navy and Marines would not allow a large scale operation to take place while they were spectators. The task of delivering Delta Force into Iran was resolved at the Joint Chief of Staff level. The Marines would fly the transport helicopters, which would depart from a Navy task force in the Indian Ocean. While this rationale for pilot selection was denied by the military leadership after the failed rescue attempt, participants believe that, in the absence of an alternative explanation, the JCS committed to involving all four services in the operation. The request for Air Force Special Operations pilots to fly the helicopters from the carriers was denied so that the Marines could participate in the operation, not because they were better qualified, or because the Air Force pilots would blow the operational security of the mission. Involving all four services is a clear example of political culture at work.

The JCS negotiated a compromise, failing to realize that asking conventional forces to perform unconventional operations was asking too much (Knotts, 9 Jul 97; Anonymous interview, 30 Jun 97; Anonymous interview, 7 Jul 97). The rational culture which requested the Air Force pilots in an attempt to minimize risk lost out to the political culture, which resulted in an overall failure to minimize the level of risk in the operation.

In Waco, the dominant culture within the operation was arguably a symbolic culture, with political culture secondary, and rational culture present only at the level of the operators. The act of serving a warrant, to ATF, had become a highly symbolic activity, and the preparations for this activity did not reflect the guidance of sound strategy, but rather the characteristics of ritual, a kind of "going through the motions" without paying much attention to potential consequences. The absence of a rational culture inhibited the development of a sound strategy, and left the wrong people in the position of evaluating whether the strategy which was devised should have been implemented.

The culture of ATF was vastly different from the culture of Delta Force, which represented the most rational, and therefore the most appropriate culture studied for planning and executing high-risk operations. As one of the newer federal law enforcement agencies with a fairly narrow mission, the ATF is lesser known than the FBI, the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), or U.S. Customs. Prior to the fiasco at Waco, neither the media nor the public paid a great deal of attention to the ATF. However, as with other federal law enforcement agencies, the ATF began to increase its emphasis on high-risk tactical operations. This grew naturally out of the increase in drug-related crimes in the eighties and the increasing role that firearms played in criminal activity.

The FBI's Hostage Rescue Team was recognized for its well-trained personnel, and DEA and U.S. Customs were increasingly participating in "military-style" operations. Budgets grew for the tactical units within these departments. ATF soon followed suit and invested both money and personnel in developing its own special response teams (SRTs). By the late eighties, it had established its own system of tactical response teams designed to serve warrants on "high-risk" suspects and handle barricaded suspects.

The problem for ATF, however, was that they exposed themselves to a new level of activity without making the necessary procedural changes to handle the full range of possibilities which could present themselves. The leaders of tactical units were selected using the same process as the selection of any supervisor in the ATF organization. Factors such as seniority, duty performance, and experience were considered, but not necessarily tactical experience. Tactical operators were volunteers who were sent to additional training, and then returned to their every-day operations. The SRTs were used to serve warrants on potentially dangerous suspects, most often in the pre-dawn hours, in fairly controlled urban settings. Suspects rarely resisted arrest. As a result, the planning and execution of such operations became routine. The details of executing the search warrants were glossed over, and tasks which become critical when an operation begins to go awry were neglected. The success of these small-scale operations were highly symbolic to the ATF agents. They conjured up heroic images of law enforcement officers seeking justice, risking their lives, and coming out unscathed. The "high-risk" operations built ATF's confidence, and led them to believe they deserved the reputation, and therefore the opportunities which agencies such as the FBI and DEA were getting. When the Waco operation presented itself, the ATF leadership prepared for it the same

way they had prepared for every other warrant they served. Tragically, the operation called for much more extensive preparations.

There is evidence that a rational culture, if allowed to develop, could emerge within ATF. One interviewee noted that there are a number of younger ATF agents who have extensive knowledge and sound fundamentals with regard to conducting high-risk operations. Unfortunately, they do not have enough seniority within the ATF organization to be able to change the policies and procedures governing high-risk operations (Anonymous interview, 7 Jul 97). Essentially, the rational culture within ATF has been stifled.

ATF's failure to develop a culture which was capable of meeting the demands of a large-scale tactical operation contributed to its overall failure to prepare for the worst-case scenario which presented itself at the Branch-Davidian compound in 1993. A culture which placed less emphasis on the symbolic aspects of high-risk operations and more emphasis on the objective of high-risk operations would have assisted ATF's planners in identifying the operation's inherent risk before the warrant was served.

## **B. Selection and Training**

One of the most startling aspects, in hindsight, of the Iran hostage rescue operation and the raid at Waco was the selection and training of personnel for these two operations. The quality of selection and training ranged from exemplary, for Army's Delta Force, to inexplicable, in the selection of Navy and then Marine pilots to fly the helicopter mission into Iran to what I can only label as bureaucratic, which describes the process which included ATF agents in a tactical operation based upon their day-to-day position within the ATF organization. Interviewees cited selection of personnel as a



critical determinant of the success of tactical operations (Anonymous interview, 30 Jun 97; Elmore, 1 Jul 97; Knotts, 9 Jul 97; Anonymous interview, 7 Jul 97; Ishimoto, 2 Aug 97). All agreed on the need to identify individuals with both the will and the skill to participate in such operations.

The Army's Delta Force understands that the effectiveness of the unit is directly related to the quality of the personnel within it. From its inception, selection of personnel was taken *very* seriously. Modeled after Great Britain's Special Air Service (SAS), Delta Force was created to fill a gap in the Army's ability to counter terrorism and respond to unconventional threats. To some degree, this gap was a result of the post-Vietnam culture within the Army--the shrinking budgets, the low morale, and the departure of many of the Army's personnel who had learned first hand the value of special operations capabilities in Vietnam. By the mid-seventies, some elements of the Army leadership recognized this widening gap, and challenged Colonel Charlie Beckwith to develop a unit similar to the British SAS.

A three phase selection process is used for Delta Force. Only volunteers are considered. The first phase of selection involves strenuous physical fitness tests. The second phase of training involves a formal selection course, again modeled after the one used by the SAS. Only after a number of strenuous days which test a soldier's map and compass skills, physical and mental endurance, is the final selection phase initiated, which involves psychological scrutiny and evaluation (Beckwith, p.109). While physical fitness might help during the selection process, it is not the most telling indicator of a volunteer's probability of success. What Delta Force is looking for is for someone who just will not quit, under any circumstances (Knotts, 9 Jul 97). For Delta, skill is

secondary to will. As a result, Delta recruits very trainable members with extraordinarily diverse talents, who will stop at nothing to accomplish their mission. Each member of Delta, regardless of rank, has made it through the same rigorous selection process, and is confident in the knowledge that the person next to him is just as capable. These are men who looked for challenges, and are comfortable handling the most difficult tasks. They have a different mentality than a soldier of the conventional army. This mentality enabled them to develop a full-time unit which did not question whether the Iran hostage rescue mission was possible, but rather questioned only whether the President would call on them to execute their plan.

The same sound methodology was not used to select the additional personnel needed to deliver Delta Force to the objective. From the command element to the pilots and air crews who would carry Delta Force around the world, the Iran hostage rescue attempt was staffed and organized as a result of "ad-hocery" (Elmore, 1 Jul 97). This term refers to the improvised nature by which the planning team was assembled to deal with the Iran hostage crisis, and to the fact that following the crisis, the planning apparatus would be dismantled and the participants would return to their respective areas of responsibility. Up to that time, the Iran hostage situation was the most critical issue to face the military since the end of the Vietnam war. The leadership knew that the situation had to be handled effectively, and at the same time recognized that it was an opportunity to restore America's faith in all four of its services.

The leadership of the Iran hostage rescue mission diverted from the process necessary to ensure the right people would be involved in the operation. As a result, a number of pilots were sent to train for the Iran rescue mission who were not volunteers.

They had not signed up for the type of flying they were being asked to perform, nor had they been adequately trained to fly the mission at hand (Ishimoto, 2 Aug 97). Perhaps worse, the personnel who were placing their lives in the hands of these pilots had never trained or operated with them previously, and were not confident in either their technical competency to complete the mission, or their ability to withstand the pressure associated with executing special operations. Many of Delta's members had flown on special operations with Air Force pilots in Vietnam from the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando, and while they were not certain they had maintained their skills, they never for a moment doubted that those pilots would not quit, and would do whatever was asked of them to accomplish the mission. The Navy and Marine pilots had no proven track record, and did not demonstrate during training that they had what it would take to successfully execute the mission.

The Navy and the Marine aviators understood they needed training... the biggest problem was the amount they needed and the relatively little amount of time to accomplish that in. Bad feelings about the (aviators) were capable of being overcome had they shown us they could fly realistically... which they didn't (Ishimoto, 28 July 97).

In the end, the link that Delta Force and some of the leadership recognized as the weakest, was the one which broke.

An ATF agent who wishes to pursue a position on a special response team (SRT) has to volunteer for it. From that point, however, there is a somewhat less rigid structure of selection than in the military. If there is a position open on the team, the agent is in good standing with his supervisor, and is known to have adequate firearms skills and sound tactics, it is more than likely that the agent will be directed to attend the next training session, and will be scheduled to attend the next formal training class. Many

departments offer incentive pay for members of specialized units, and require that volunteers have a certain number of years experience on the force, although this can be waived if an individual has transferred from another law enforcement agency. The leadership positions within a specialized unit are determined strictly by seniority, as opposed to by experience on the team or skill. Furthermore, above the operator level, it is possible for a special-agent-in-charge of a certain region to find himself in the position of Incident Commander of a tactical incident without ever having been on an SRT or through SRT training, merely by nature of his position within the overall ATF organization. This rigid hierarchy is determined by ATF's operating instructions and does not vary greatly from a number of other civilian agencies.

The training of ATF agents is highly reflective of ATF's culture, as well as that of a number of federal law enforcement agencies. ATF agents rarely, if ever, train with military units, or attend courses given by the military on special operations. In fact, certain courses designed for civilian law enforcement agencies specifically note in their advertisements that none of their staff are military personnel, and that they do not emphasize military-style operations (Knotts, 8 Jul 97). There is a distinct effort to separate themselves from any association with the military. This attitude, however, appears to be held at the administrative level, and often conflicts with the perspective of those agents with military backgrounds and those who have previously attended training at some of the locations which train both civilian and military personnel. The Central Training Academy in Albuquerque, New Mexico has provided training for both military and civilian tactical units, but some instructors have acknowledged that on occasion, when the leadership (to include ATF leadership) have come to observe the training their

personnel are receiving, they have advised their personnel that they will not be allowed to implement the tactics they are learning once they return to their respective agencies, a situation which creates great frustration among the operators as well as the instructors (Anonymous interview, 2 Jul 97).

The reluctance on the part of some civilian law enforcement agencies such as ATF to routinely pursue training with military units, other federal law enforcement agencies, or from military sources has had two results. One, it has isolated these agencies from a large portion of the special operations community, and cast doubt on the skill level of those agents who have been sent to outside sources for their training. As a result, military units are more cautious when responding to requests for assistance from federal agencies, a situation which may have impacted the level of cooperation at Waco. Second, and related to the first, the cross flow of information and tactics between the civilian and military worlds has diminished, which means both are operating in somewhat of a vacuum, content with their own tactics, and perhaps unaware of lessons the other side has learned. By the time the Waco scenario developed, the ATF had become very comfortable serving warrants on a small number of suspects, in relatively close-quarters environment, during the early morning hours, against comparable, if not inferior, fire power. They had not been exposed to the sort of situation which faced them at Waco, and had not had to plan an operation of that size or scope or contemplate the number of contingencies the operation could present. The results "reflected ATF's overall lack of experience and training in small unit operations and military-style organization. The lesson learned was for ATF to increase training...which they have only paid token attention to" (Ishimoto, 2 Aug 97) Its possible that the reluctance of

civilian law enforcement agencies to pursue military training stems from the public's demand for police forces which do not in any way reflect the notion of a standing army. If the law enforcement community is responding to a public desire by prohibiting their personnel from obtaining military training, then they should also prohibit their organizations from conducting paramilitary operations.

Interviews of personnel who have been involved in both military and civilian tactical operations revealed a range of emotions from pity to disgust at what happened to the ATF agents at Waco. Their opinions of ATF agents ranged from young, eager professionals who are willing to learn, but are stifled by their superiors, to a "bunch of cowboys who use inferior tactics against inferior opponents, and finally met an opponent who would not give up when the door was opened and badges were flashed" (Anonymous interview, 2 Jul 97; Anonymous interview, 7 Jul 97). The general consensus was that the leadership of ATF needs to make a concerted effort to train their personnel adequately, to apply tough standards to personnel seeking SRT positions, and to limit SRT leadership positions to those who are properly trained, who have SRT experience, and who have proven they are capable of managing complex tactical situations. With that must come an understanding that an agency the size of ATF is going to be limited in terms of manpower and firepower, and must not only know what its operational limitations are, but must be willing to swallow its organizational ego. Acknowledging its limitations in the face of an overwhelming threat and requesting assistance from the appropriate agency or agencies will prevent exposing its agents to unnecessary risks (Ishimoto, 2 Aug 97).

The concentration of planning efforts into the hands of a few reflect a failing on the part of ATF leadership to recognize the increased challenges of large-scale versus small-scale operations. The structure of ATF's planning organization may well have been effective for serving warrants on small residences, with fewer than ten suspects on the premises, with small scale means of resistance, and questionable will to resist. Facing the potential obstacles within the Branch-Davidian complex, the organization simply did not have the depth nor the level of expertise required to competently plan and execute an operation of this scale. The ATF leadership failed to realize that "without sound fundamentals, the success of small operations will not carry over into the large scale arena" (Elmore, 1 Jul 97).

At Waco, the Incident Commander and Tactical Commander were designated based on their position and rank only. They had never planned an operation the size of the Waco raid. Their training did not lead them to develop a written operation order, which is a cornerstone of military planning. Their plan did not indicate that they had considered the foundations of strategy outlined in the introduction, and the decision to execute the plan in spite of unfavorable developments indicated a failure to continuously evaluate basic elements of their strategy. Stunned that an operation order had not been accomplished, one of the team leaders with prior military experience attempted to put one in writing the evening before the raid, but never completed his work. None of the assault force members received a briefing covering the information which is normally contained in an operation order, a step in the planning and training for an operation which is deemed crucial (Knotts, 9 Jul 97). Every team member needs to know exactly what his responsibilities are, as well as the responsibilities of the other team members. It

is through the operation order that contingency plans are revealed, tasks delegated, procedures outlined, and the details of an operation presented. Team members are given the opportunity to ask for clarification of any aspect of the plan that is unclear, and oftentimes, a detail which has been left out is brought to the attention of the planners. None of this was accomplished prior to the execution of the raid at Waco. With no opportunity to question the plan, no questions were asked, and the "plan" went from concept to operation. It is unknown whether this is standard practice when ATF prepares to serve a search warrant. However, the operation order is one aspect of military training that ATF should require of its tactical planners, and reincorporate into its planning culture. Many of the larger civilian police agencies with very well trained S.W.A.T. teams rely on an operation order, in some way shape or form, to brief their personnel prior to an operation.

Finally, the ATF agents who were responsible for executing the warrant were given three days to train together for the operation. The agents used Fort Hood to train because of the suitability of their facilities, not out of any desire for the military to review or critique their plans. There were three separate SRTs brought together to execute the warrant. Even though the three teams were given distinct portions of the operation to execute, it was the opinion of all those interviewed that three days was not adequate to bring together three distinct units for an operation like the planned raid at Waco, which had the possibility of changing rapidly and in mid-stream (Anonymous interview, 2 Jul 97; Anonymous interview, 7 Jul 97; Knotts, 8 Jul 97). This again reflects a kind of nonchalance on the part of the planners, perhaps overconfidence combined with the underestimation of the capabilities of the opposition.



In Iran as well as at Waco, the organizations planning the operations compromised the chances of mission success by failing to realize the importance of selecting the right personnel to accomplish all aspects of the operation, as well as the impact that past and present training could have on the operation. Its possible that other operations have achieved success in spite of the presence of a few less than qualified or inexperienced players. However, the more complex the operation, and the more determined the resistance, the less likely it is that the weak link will not be exposed.

### **C. Command, Control, and Communication (C3)**

In any complex operation, whether it is civilian or military, conventional or unconventional, command, control, and communication capabilities are critical. In name alone, dynamic operations imply ever-changing conditions, and leaders must have the capability to recognize these changes, react to them, and communicate decisions to their forces. In both Iran and in Waco, there were aspects of command, control, and communications which hampered operations, and inhibited necessary actions.

The military arguably had a more daunting C3 challenge in Iran than ATF did at Waco. The challenge was to conduct an operation half way around the world in a hostile country by integrating four separate services, and to do so secretly until the operation was well underway. The task would have been a challenge with just one service component was used, and the integration of separate units and separate communications systems exacerbated the situation.

The command situation was complex. As a rule, an operational chain of command needs to be as simple and direct as possible. The levels of command should be only those necessary. For the Iran operation, the chain of command began at the highest

level, with President Carter authorizing the mission to go forward (See Appendix A). From there, operational control was turned over to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who monitored the operation from Washington. General James B. Vaught, the Commander of the Joint Task Force was deployed forward to provide a level of command and control between the operational forces and the leadership in Washington, and exercised direct control over the rescue operation. From this point down, things got a little more murky. Lieutenant Colonel James Kyle, USAF, was to have command and control over the rescue forces until they departed Desert One, when Colonel Charlie Beckwith took over for the duration of the operation. This meant that until the rescue force left Desert One, Lieutenant Colonel Kyle had operational control over all of the arriving aircraft at Desert One, to include the helicopters departing from the Navy aircraft carriers. Its quite possible that this was truly the best arrangement which could have been devised in an unfortunately awkward situation. But Kyle, as he acknowledged, was inexperienced at commanding ground forces, and did not feel comfortable managing the Army Rangers and Delta Force personnel who were securing the airfield at Desert One, a responsibility which he wisely delegated to Colonel Beckwith. In the end, the communication situation made command and control at Desert One extremely difficult for Kyle, who was attempting to coordinate airfield operations, pinpoint the location of the inbound helicopters, monitor refueling operations, oversee the Army Rangers tasked with securing the airfield, and inform the command centers of the progress of the operation.

Difficulties with communications fell into two categories. The forces inherited some complications which can be attributed to the limited budgets and post-Vietnam War inefficiency of the 1970's. Other complications arose purely as a result of

integrating the four services, who have distinct procurement systems, use different communications systems, different encryption systems, and different sets of jargon while communicating. This problem continues to hamper joint service operations. The task force also inherited problems with the availability and capabilities of the communication equipment. Only Delta Force had and was familiar with the secure satellite communication equipment. This equipment was not available to the Air Force component of the operation for rehearsal or training. The Air Force members' ignorance of some capabilities resulted in unnecessary precautions during the mission. The limited number of systems available forced the aircraft commanders to relay their radio transmissions through a command center, rather than transmitting directly to the ground commander. Furthermore, the systems in the helicopters were not compatible with those in the C-130 transport aircraft, which prevented direct communication from the C-130s to the helicopters. The limited number of secure radio systems available meant that when one system was rendered inoperable at Desert One, it was an hour and a half before another system arrived on scene to replace the first, a veritable lifetime during a complex operation.

In addition to these communication limitations, a number of actions taken and decisions made by members of the task force placed additional burdens on overall C3 capabilities. First, the communications procedures for the movement to Desert One were designed for radio silence under visual flight conditions, which at times did not exist (Kyle, p. 329). There were insufficient contingency plans made for other flight conditions, and the Marine helicopter pilots were unable to adapt to this condition. A very basic hand-held radio system could have been used by the Marines to cover this

contingency and enable them to communicate with each other in poor visibility without risking detection by the Iranians, but this back up requirement was overlooked (Ishimoto, 22 Jun 97). To make matters worse, the Marines had removed the secure inter-aircraft communications system. This system could have prevented the complete chaos which resulted when the aircraft lost visual contact and enabled the aircraft with maintenance problems to report their status. The code system devised for instances when radio silence was impossible was cumbersome, and in some situations useless. In reality, the satellite communication system made a code word system unnecessary, but the Air Force personnel were not aware of this fact until they heard Delta Force members transmitting in clear voice during the operation.

The aircraft were supposed to be flying in radio silence, so the command centers took the absence of radio transmissions to mean that the operation was proceeding smoothly. Because of the helicopter flight's communication limitations and poor internal command and control, inadequate information was transmitted to the command centers. By maintaining radio silence and assuming that their individual problems would not compromise the operation, the helicopter flight collectively caused a condition which resulted in mission failure. By the time those in a position to influence events were aware of the situation, it was too late to react. Complicating matters from a command standpoint was the fact that no helicopter expert was present in the command center. Such an expert could have advised the leadership that immediate control needed to be exerted over the wayward flight, as well as provide technical guidance as the maintenance issues arose (Kyle, p.331).

While a number of the conditions present at Desert One reflected the fact that the military had to put together a piece meal operation, there were actions taken and actions not taken demonstrate the close ties that command, control, and communication have to the concept of operations inertia. It was no surprise to the members of Delta Force that the helicopter force was crippled by communication problems. Participants with a special operations mindset expected to have problems during the operation, and were prepared to adapt and overcome whatever came in their way. The helicopter flight was inexperienced, operating unfamiliar equipment, and was pushed to its limits by simply executing its portion of the mission portfolio, let alone reacting to an unexpected condition. The leadership of the helicopter flight were paralyzed by the changing conditions, which pulled the entire mission off its intended course. The leadership of the operation did not realize the leap of faith that they were expecting the conventional forces to make, and did not recognize the fact that they were not making it in time to intercede and reestablish control over the situation.

In Waco, the C3 situation was very different from the military's predicament in Iran. Whereas contingencies crippled the Iran mission, the Waco operation did not cover basic elements of a communication plan, and was hampered by poor decisions regarding aspects of command and control which were planned. The ATF operation was limited to the Branch-Davidian compound, and did not have to contend with the complexities of a leap-frog operation across thousands of miles. However, relatively speaking, the operation taxed the capabilities of the ATF as strenuously as the military was taxed in Iran.

In terms of a chain of command, ATF's higher headquarters in Washington did allow the mission to go forward, and did activate its command center the day of the operation to monitor the activity in Texas. In terms of actual control over the operation, the command post established in Waco was responsible for making the decisions which arose as the operation progressed. Normally, the Incident Commander would be located within the command post, where all of the information regarding the operation is collected, so that he is available to make critical decisions as they arise. However, the Incident Commander for the Waco operation decided to observe the assault from a helicopter. This proved to be a poor decision, as the helicopter was forced to land after receiving fire from the compound, effectively removing the Incident Commander from any position of command for the first hour of the operation. By the time he was able to return to the command post the fate of the operation had been sealed. This is a lesson that was learned over and over again by military forces during the Vietnam War, but somehow was not known or was not given credence by the leaders of the Waco operation. (Knotts, 23 Oct 97)

Because the Incident Commander was not in a position to direct control over the assault forces, the Tactical Commander was left as the only layer of command with any real influence over the team leaders and assault force members. When the assault forces were essentially ambushed outside of the compound, the Tactical Commander was placed in a position where strong leadership and direction were needed, but were not exerted. Because there were no contingency plans briefed for what to do if the initial assault was repelled, the team leaders needed direction from the tactical commander, and failing that, were left on their own to determine what to do in the face of overwhelming

firepower. The inexperience of the leadership and the fact that they had not placed themselves in positions where they could maintain effective control over the assault forces stalled the momentum of the assault, prevented alternative actions from being implemented, and greatly eroded the morale of the forces who had attempted to execute the warrant in the face of severe opposition.

As ATF attempted to recover from the barrage of fire it faced from the compound, the poor communication situation further exacerbated the command and control fiasco. With the assault forces in no position to communicate with the members in the compound, the ATF agents in the undercover house attempted to contact Koresh by telephone. The undercover house was not in the operation's chain of command, but they were the only personnel who knew how to contact the residents. When one frightened compound resident called 911, the Sheriff's Department was placed in the awkward position of trying to relay negotiations between the compound and the ATF command post. The command post had very poor communication with the forces on scene, and was reduced to sending reports back to the command post in Washington, rather than effectively controlling the activities of the personnel on scene. Even after the cease fire was negotiated, the forces were not given clear instructions as to how to withdraw from their forward positions, and were placed in the humiliating position of simply standing up with their hands in the air and walking back out of the compound and awaiting further instructions. Effective withdraw instructions could have enabled the assault forces to maintain some semblance of order and discipline, and to take up positions around the compound's perimeter, which as yet had not been effectively secured. Since no rallying point had been designated, many of the ATF agents were left to mill around at the

intersection of two roads outside the compound, where they were eventually picked up by a bus and transported to the initial staging area. The command post struggled to handle the number of critical tasks which needed to be accomplished to regain positive control over the situation. In the end, the arrival of additional special response teams and the FBI HRT provided the relief that the ATF leadership needed.

The poor C3 at Waco reflected a simple lack of preparedness on the part of the ATF leadership to handle anything but a best-case scenario at the compound. The communication plans assumed that the forces would effectively breach the compound, and that the senior leadership of the operation would not have to give instructions from the point that the assault forces departed the staging area to the point that the compound was secured by the SRTs. The leadership expected to be nothing more than spectators until the scene was secured.

In reality, the leadership were reduced to spectators, but the assault forces desperately needed their guidance. The failure to plan for contingencies and worst-case scenarios reflected a sort of complacency which had been reinforced by the long history of successful small scale operations which required much less planning and preparedness than the Waco operation. Quite simply, ATF was taxed beyond its capabilities, and failed to recognize this fact. Rather than identify limitations, the leadership chose to underestimate threats and discount the possibility of certain negative outcomes. The results of this course of decision-making proved disastrous.

#### **D. Intelligence and Operational Security (OPSEC)**

Two of the most critical components of planning a tactical operation are intelligence and operational security. Failure to collect intelligence, poor handling of



intelligence once it is gathered, or failure to understand the implications of an intelligence report can spell doom for any tactical operation. Operational security is conceptually distinct from intelligence, but similarly deals with denying information to anyone who does not need to know, as well as diverting attention from the true objective of a certain operation, training exercise, or activity through disinformation. Failure to maintain operational security can compromise a tactical operation long before its planned execution date. In both the Waco assault and the Iran hostage rescue attempt, the issues of operational security and the handling of intelligence underwent intense scrutiny during the investigations into the causes of the two failed operations.

Analysis of the role of OPSEC and intelligence in the Waco and Iran operations suggests several conclusions. It seems that those critics of the Iran rescue attempt who claim that there was too much emphasis on OPSEC are wrong. Because the operation was not compromised in planning or execution, it is difficult to say there was too much OPSEC. Relaxation of some precautions could well have resulted in the very compromise that was avoided. Rather, it appears that certain decisions which had little to do with OPSEC were said to have been made for OPSEC reasons, to avoid exposing the shakier reasoning behind those decisions to those investigators who were looking to assign blame. The term OPSEC became a smoke screen, which the military leadership hoped would deflect attention from more salient issues. The Waco operation demonstrated what can happen when some of the OPSEC procedures implemented during the Iran rescue operation are neglected during the planning phase of a tactical operation.

Military doctrine cites OPSEC as a key component of protecting forces so that commanders can apply them at a decisive time and place (FM 100-5, 2-10). OPSEC prevents the enemy from gaining an advantage, and is comprised of both passive and active measures to know the enemy, prevent the enemy from knowing your next move, and to use deception to mislead the enemy with regard to true intentions. Successful OPSEC involves calculated risks designed to preserve the force and maximize opportunities to defeat the enemy (FM 100-5, 2-5). In both case studies presented, as in most tactical operations, the operation's success was contingent in part upon the element of surprise. The planners of the Iran operation were acutely aware of the need to keep tight security around the planning and training for the operation. The failing may not have been too much OPSEC, but that there was not one coherent OPSEC plan or focal point whose sole function was to manage the OPSEC issues. Because of the varying range of experience among the participants, there was a varying range of understanding of how certain decisions would impact OPSEC. As a result, some actions were prevented in the name of OPSEC which might have been addressed adequately in a coherent OPSEC plan, and other actions were not taken by some personnel which others took freely, knowing there was no threat to OPSEC. The Army's Delta Force routinely addressed OPSEC issues and had a solid understanding of the potential OPSEC issues which would need to be addressed prior to each step in the planning and training for the operation. However, some of the personnel involved in the operation were not used to implementing OPSEC procedures on a daily basis, or were operating unfamiliar equipment, which led to uneven application of standards. For example, the answer given by the JCS when the Air Force pilots were requested was that selectively removing Air

Force pilots from their current assignments would raise questions. This may be true, but then the Marine pilots sent to train for the operation represented the equivalent of an entire flight of pilots, certainly a large enough deployment to raise some questions. If the absence of an entire flight can be covered, the absence of individual pilots from a number of different locations can be covered. A more obvious example is the Air Force personnel's use of a code system while transmitting using the secure communication system. Their fear of compromising their positions resulted in their implementing a complex matrix system to avoid speaking clearly over the radio. However, Delta force, who had used the radio system before and knew of its ability to scramble messages, spoke clearly over the same radio system, without any kind of code system. The Air Force's unwarranted fear of detection inhibited them from relaying what could have been vital information to the command center.

In many ways, the Iran hostage rescue attempt was a success, in terms of OPSEC. The military moved five different types of aircraft containing special forces personnel, command and control elements, Army Rangers, support vehicles, arms, and equipment halfway around the world over the course of three days through a number of foreign countries, penetrated Iranian airspace, and landed undetected hundreds of miles inside the border of a sovereign nation without being detected.

Consider the OPSEC successes...movement of helos, 130s, 141s, KC-135s, SAR aircraft, Rangers, Det A, Delta, 1<sup>st</sup> SOW...without a single compromise; penetration of Iranian airspace and a first class radar screen without detection; infiltration of a number of people over a several month period into Tehran without detection, etc. The OPSEC problem lay in a lack of experience on the part of the helo crews...and on the part of some 1<sup>st</sup> SOW folks (Ishimoto, 29 Jul 97).

And I would argue, on the part of some of the leadership orchestrating the operation. It was a lack of understanding of what would constitute a valid OPSEC concern for the operation which led certain participants to take unnecessary actions during the operation which contributed to the overall failure of the operation. Had the helicopter pilots realized that they could have safely flown at higher altitudes, they may have avoided the brutal dust clouds. Had the Air Force personnel been more knowledgeable of their communication capabilities, they would have been able to advise the helicopter pilots of the poor visibility along the route. And had the helicopter which was forced to land broken radio silence and advised the flight leader of his condition, the flight leader may have pressed on when his maintenance problem arose, as opposed to turning back to the aircraft carrier. OPSEC became a burden in the Iran mission not because it compromised the operation, but because it led certain participants to make decisions based on flawed assumptions.

For the Waco assault to be successful, operational security was just as important as in Iran, and should have been easier to maintain. For one, there were fewer people involved in the Waco operation. The operation was entirely within United States territory, and was confined to a relatively remote portion in central Texas. However, some characteristics of the ATF organization presented some OPSEC challenges which were not adequately met. For one, ATF is not capable of sustaining an operation like the one planned at Waco without assistance from support agencies such as local law enforcement agencies, contracted emergency medical services, and commercial hotels. Unlike the military, they cannot sustain themselves for extended periods of time or if large numbers of personnel are involved. Therefore, agencies external to the operation

are asked to provide support services. In the case of Waco, when a number of local businesses in a relatively small city are contracted for services on the same dates, during the same times, people begin to put the pieces of the puzzle together. A good OPSEC plan would have developed a comprehensive cover plan for the contracted services, would have dispersed the personnel in a number of hotels, would have ensured that rooms were reserved under an agency other than ATF, and that personnel did not arrive at the scene clothed in garments which identified them as federal agents. In the least, the personnel would not have arrived in an 80 vehicle convoy of easily identified government vehicles operating with their headlights on in broad daylight. However, the leadership's inexperience with operations of this size precluded such actions from taking place.

In spite of rather lax OPSEC procedures, there was no evidence that an ATF agent directly compromised the assault plan. However, the ATF relationship with the media directly contributed to the compromise of the assault plan. When ATF learned of the pending story on David Koresh and the Branch-Davidians, they made contact with the newspaper in question and attempted to prevent the publication of the story. But the ATF agents who spoke with the newspaper executives failed to provide the media with a convincing reason not to publish the story. They indicated that some law enforcement activity was about to occur but, understandably, would not be specific about the nature of the activity or the time frame. This unproductive communication with the media resulted in two negative outcomes—first, it failed to prevent the publication of the story, and second, it alerted the media that some activity was pending, enough of a tease for the newspaper to investigate on its own. The newspaper learned from one of the emergency medical personnel contracted to provide support services of the date of the assault and of

a window of time when the services were requested. The newspaper provided this information to other media services in Waco, which resulted in a flurry of media activity around the compound the morning of the planned assault. As stated previously, a reporter who became lost on the roads around the compound inadvertently tipped off one of the compound residents of the impending assault, thus compromising the whole operation. If ATF learned anything from the Waco fiasco, it is that it must have personnel who are properly trained in dealing with the media, and in working with the operational planners to determine what information can be made available to the media, what must be denied, and when there should be no need to get involved with media relations at all.

From an intelligence standpoint, both operations include examples of less than ideal intelligence operations, but the issues surrounding Iran pale in comparison with the barely existing intelligence component of the planning phase of the Waco operation. The Iran rescue operation was an intelligence challenge in terms of collection and processing, but these challenges were eventually met. The glitches during the Iran operation occurred once the intelligence which was collected, processed, and relevant to the operation was disseminated. The low level of experience some participants had in operations of this nature prevented them from knowing the full impact the available intelligence could have on their role in the operation, and inhibited their ability to adapt to or overcome changing conditions during the execution phase (Ishimoto, 29 Jul 97).

Essentially, the intelligence operation during the hostage crisis can be compared to a two-sided funnel. A lot of information was poured into one side of the funnel, most of which was interesting, but not relevant to planning a tactical operation. Once the

intelligence personnel on the planning staff had sifted through the pile of information they had and sorted out the relevant facts, the information was sent out the other end of the funnel to the operational units who needed to know the information because it could impact their portion of the mission.

The problem for the Iran operation stemmed from the fact that there were a number of operational units involved in many different locations with varying degrees of experience handling intelligence. Delta Force's own intelligence officers handled all of the information coming down the funnel, and knew exactly who in their unit needed which relevant bits of intelligence information. However, it was well beyond the responsibilities of Delta's intelligence arm to ensure that other units involved in the overall operation had the same information in front of them and were drawing similar conclusions based on that information. They could only assume that they were getting the same information down their funnel that everyone else was getting.

In reality, however, there was no one on the task force staff responsible for ensuring that some form of standardized intelligence report was received by the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine elements of the operation. As a result, the level to which different elements were informed of certain details varied. This weakness in the overall intelligence function was not fully exposed until the operation was executed. For one, the Air Force pilots were given a different assessment of the Iranian radar detection capabilities than the Navy and Marine pilots aboard the aircraft carrier. As a result, the Marine helicopter pilots truly believed that if they flew above 200 feet at any time they risked compromising the operation, while the Air Force pilots understood that once they were beyond the coastal defense system, there was no reason, in terms of security, to fly

at such low levels if conditions dictated otherwise. Later in the operation, the Air Force pilots observed the suspended dust phenomena known as "haboob," but were never briefed of the phenomena by the Air Weather Service personnel at any time during training for the operation. And yet the CIA operator on board the aircraft had been previously advised by CIA personnel of this bizarre condition. An indication that information may not have been flowing between the different arms of the intelligence operation occurred earlier in the training when the Air Force planners spent days looking for a solution to finding the remote airstrip in the middle of the desert without lights, only to be presented with a solution by the CIA members on the staff, who had developed the technology years earlier, unknown to the military (Kyle, p.107).

These difficulties are not surprising when one looks at the nature of the organization responsible for planning the mission. Each branch of the service has its own intelligence personnel, who are rarely called upon to handle the kind of intelligence required of rescue operation. The CIA operates entirely outside of the realm of the military's operations, with the exception of a few liaisons who work on staffs which have been formed since the late seventies to handle crises as they arise. At the time, there were very few CIA operators who dealt with the military on a daily basis outside of the special operations community. Once again, personnel without special operations experience were at a disadvantage when faced with the prospect of collecting, processing, and disseminating information relevant to the operation, as were inexperienced personnel who had to determine the impact of the information.

The Waco operation exemplified the problems of an organization with no experience gathering, processing, and analyzing the kind of intelligence necessary to plan



and execute a tactical operation. This kind of intelligence is very different from and is in no way interchangeable with the kind of information a federal agent needs to conduct a criminal investigation or to prepare a court case. The ATF agents initially gathered information to establish probable cause for a search warrant, and to charge David Koresh with violations of federal law. But, the leadership failed completely to collect, process, and analyze the intelligence information required to enable them to devise a sound tactical plan for serving the warrant which they worked so hard to justify obtaining.

Law enforcement understanding of intelligence to support tactical operations is woefully neglect. Sarabyn and Buford were trying to be chief investigators, planners, logisticians, and intelligence analysts at the same time. Usually the intelligence is oriented toward making a court case, to establish probable cause, and NOT toward planning the actual arrest and seizure of evidence. Intelligence in support of the tactical side is much in need of improvement for *all* law enforcement agencies (Ishimoto, 2 Aug 97).

The result was that ATF's plan was based upon very questionable information gathered over a very short time and was implemented in spite of intelligence which indicated that the assumed conditions inside the compound did not exist.

The inexperience of the ATF planners is most evident in the fact that there was no one on the planning staff responsible for collection, analysis, and dissemination of intelligence information. Even to the most skilled and experienced intelligence officers, this can be an extremely difficult and time consuming task. Instead, the planners handled the task of managing intelligence in addition to every other responsibility which comes with planning a large scale tactical operation. Because intelligence was no one's designated responsibility, no one tackled it. The poor organization of the planning staff resulted in serious neglect of the intelligence function.

From the start, there were signs that the intelligence function was not operating properly. In some ways, the supervisor of the undercover house was correct to complain that he had not received any guidance on the kind of intelligence they were supposed to gather. However, instead of receiving clear guidance, he was told to scale back operations. At this point, critical communication between the assault force leaders, planners, and undercover agents failed to occur. The undercover house continued to take pictures which were never developed, and if developed, never studied. The planners continued to make decisions based on raw intelligence information which was sporadically collected. And the assault force leaders continued to believe that the undercover operation was a full-time, closely monitored operation providing solid intelligence reports.

In fairness to the planners, the agents were trained to gather the kind of intelligence that stands up in court, not the kind of intelligence which forms the basis for sound tactical operations. Without the training or experience in managing a tactical intelligence operation, the results were not surprising. Overwhelmed by the enormity of preparations for the assault, the leadership neglected the intelligence function. By not looking at information which questioned the strategy of the assault plan, there was no reason to modify the plan. Once again, the planners presented themselves and the assault force leaders with a best case scenario, based on selective bits of intelligence, which were themselves selectively collected. No one on the staff played devil's advocate.

It is hard to understand how no one recognized the flaws of a plan which, in hindsight, appears fairly reckless. Certainly inexperience played a big role in the fiasco, but flags were raised along the way and should have been noted by the leadership. The

response to the undercover house supervisor's request for guidance may have been the easy decision, but was a very poor decision, and reflected poor leadership, if not negligence. When one team leader realized no operation order had been accomplished, a big flag should have gone up. The operation order should have been a work in progress for a long time prior to the night before the operation, and if done properly, would have relied on a great deal of information normally obtained through intelligence reports.

Lastly, the failure to realize on the morning of the raid that the intelligence provided by the undercover agent effectively translated into a completely compromised operation proved deadly to a number of agents. The intelligence failure finally made the complete circle from poor collection and poor processing to inept handling of the final product. The only possible conclusion is that the leadership desperately wanted to believe that the residents of the compound were not going to resist, and that regardless of the intelligence, ATF agents would be able to walk in the front door and arrest the bad guys, like they had hundreds of times in the past.

#### **E. Operations Inertia**

I return here to the notion of operations inertia, referring not only to the resistance to be moved, but also to the resistance to be stopped. Both operations reached a sort of critical mass, which carried a momentum so great that it would have taken precise actions to change the course of the operation or to stop the progress of the operation entirely.

The Iran rescue mission initially had little support from both the Joint Chiefs of Staff or the President's key advisors. The Joint Chiefs, recognizing that the mission stretched the military's capabilities, were hesitant to support a plan based on sketchy

intelligence, the coordination of hundreds of personnel, large numbers of aircraft stretched across multiple time zones, and a newly formed special forces unit which would be field tested in a hostile setting. The leaders of the executive branch initially supported negotiations, which seemed more promising than the high-risk military operation. A long list of options were favored over the military option. As time progressed, this list of options grew shorter and shorter, as action after action failed to phase the Iranian militants, and the military's plan looked more and more feasible. With the election looming in 1980, the administration was willing to try almost anything to salvage the President from the ever-present reminder of the hostages in Iran. By April of 1980, only Cyrus Vance still supported the President's initial notion that "all peaceful means to secure their freedom would be exhausted before the use of force would be considered" (Vance, p.408). As none of the options seemed to work, others on Carter's staff had little confidence that the few options which had not been "exhausted" promised any greater chance of success. The rescue operation, on the other hand, had a number of tempting features. One, it was a chance to end the crisis instantaneously. Two, it was a chance to refute those critics of Carter who claimed he was weak and would never exercise force. And three, if the plan worked, it would truly be heroic, and would be a big boost for the military's, and the country's, morale.

The probability of a successful operation may have remained below 50% at the time President Carter exercised the option. But relative to the White House's belief that the chances of any other option getting the hostages back were about zero, a 50% chance looks pretty appealing, and is truly the *best* option remaining. There was nothing Cyrus Vance could do to convince the rest of the staff that diplomatic measures had a *better*

chance of success than the rescue operation. From that moment, there was no stopping the momentum of the rescue operation, short of a sudden release of the hostages. The unfortunate truth remains, however, that the probability of success could have been even higher, had different decisions been made during the planning phase.

Even though the rescue operation went forward in spite of a pocket of opposition, it is interesting to note that the military had planned a number of checkpoints, called phase lines, which designated points at which the operation could be aborted, if the situation dictated. One such phase line would not be passed if the rescue force was detected prior to entering Iran. The next phase line was reached at Desert One, when the forces lacked the required 6 helicopters, which were the minimum needed to proceed to the next phase line. It is a true credit to the leadership abilities of Colonel Beckwith and Lieutenant Colonel Kyle that they identified the limitation and did not feel compelled to press forward in spite of the helicopter shortage. Considering the momentum of the operation and the potential political pressure which could have come into play, this decision stands as one of the most difficult a field commander is ever in a position to make. While unrelated to Colonel Beckwith's decision to withdraw, an ensuing collision between support aircraft during the extraction resulted in casualties to the rescue force. Certainly, the extremely stressful conditions of the operation and the resulting letdown of having to abort may have contributed to the aircraft mishap, but it also appears that like other large scale operations, once the forward momentum begins, it is very difficult to change course without inviting disaster.

At Waco, there were also pockets of resistance to be overcome before the operation went forward. The Treasury Department and the ATF office in Washington

each had staff members who openly expressed concern over the planned assault. However, the upper level management were not fully informed of the details of the operation until after the planned execution date had been established, and after the details of the assault plan had already been worked out by the agents in Texas. The momentum of the operation was already well established. In effect, the Washington office was no more than a speed bump in the way of the planners. With three days remaining until the assault would take place, those opposed to the operation were given an opportunity to express their reservations. These reservations were addressed by the operation leadership, and the assault forces were directed to proceed. The lack of written requirements within ATF's operating instructions which specify a time table of briefings or levels of approval for operations of a certain scale or level of sensitivity contributed to the leadership in Washington's delayed knowledge of the operation, as well as its hesitation to intervene so late in the planning.

Unlike the Iran operation, however, the ATF tactical leadership did not have a series of checkpoint, or phase lines, where the situation would be reviewed, and if all the conditions for continued operations were met, the mission would proceed. Instead, the only turning point in the operation was the entrance to the compound, which once passed, represented the point of no return. Had the leadership chosen to use some form of checklist of conditions which had to be met for the operation to proceed, it's possible that the decision to proceed in spite of the fact that the assault had been compromised may not have been made. Had the Tactical Coordinator taken a moment to realize that the element of surprise had been lost, and that there were no men working in the pit, he may have realized that the decision to proceed at that point was flawed, and may have

recommended a modified plan, such as a siege. However, without these steps outlined in the plan, they were not taken, and the momentum of the operation was allowed to build, to the point where the leadership actually increased the pace of the operation, allowing it to snowball forward to its tragic end.

There are actually two phases to an operations tempo. The first phase is the planning phase, and the second phase begins when execution phase of the operation begins. Controlling the operations inertia during the planning phase involves a dedicated effort to realistically appraising alternative courses of action and considering all of the possible contingencies which could occur during the operation. From there, efforts should focus on decisions that will minimize risk during the execution phase, and on designating specific times to evaluate the overall progress of the operation to decide whether to continue along the same path, change paths, or cease activities altogether.

Controlling the operations inertia during the execution phase is a more challenging task, and is intimately tied to an organization's command, control, and communications capabilities. The nature of an operation's inertia is related to a concept Carl von Clausewitz called "friction" in his classic On War. Friction is everything that differentiates a war on paper from a real war. (Clausewitz, p.164) It is the difference between what the plan dictated, and the events which actually took place. It is everything that gets in the way of perfect execution: weather, fatigue, mechanical failure, misunderstood orders, darkness, fear, etc. Friction cannot be eliminated. But a good commander has anticipated, and is prepared to adapt to it. The diagram at Appendix B captures the notion of controlling operations inertia during the execution phase.

The first example, labeled "any operation" shows how in every case, there is what is planned, and what actually occurs. As the organization strays off course on its way to an objective, corrective actions are taken to redirect activities back toward the intended course. This can happen numerous times during an operation. Each case of "straying off course" represents a contingency, and each case of redirection represents an instance of the organization exerting command and control.

The second example represents what happened during the Waco operation. As the raid strayed from the plan, command and control failed to be exerted, and the assault force never made it on a course toward its objective. Failure to consider the contingencies which actually occurred and poor command and control resulted in failure to manage "friction," and therefore loss of control over operations inertia.

The last example shows the Iran hostage rescue operation. In this case, contingencies were considered, and attempts were made at corrective actions. But the extent of the friction during the execution phase wore down the momentum of the operation, and finally made it impossible for progress to go forward. The leadership correctly decided to cease all efforts to continue on to the objective. In this case, failure to take actions which could have helped minimize the amount of friction which could possibly enter into the execution phase resulted in the plan being overcome by extraneous events.

Large tactical operations inevitably bring together large numbers of personnel and equipment, which require great effort to coordinate, and great investments of time and money. There is a great temptation to proceed at any risk in order to get a return on this investment. But from the point the plan enters the execution phase, the cost is paid in



lives lost, rather than in time and money. The more desperate a situation becomes, the easier it becomes for decision makers to choose not to consider the worst case scenario, and to envision a best case scenario, which encourages the momentum of an operation to build, until the only way to stop it is to allow the mission to proceed to its fateful end.

## **CHAPTER 6: Conclusions**

The case studies demonstrate that the organizations involved made many mistakes while planning and executing their operations. Both organizations failed to minimize the potential risks, and both paid the consequences. The military developed a relatively sound strategy, but then failed to take the steps necessary to make sure they could implement it successfully. In Waco, the planners never developed a sound strategy, and assumed that their operators would be able to get the job done regardless of the level of risk involved in the operation. But did their actions reflect what we already know about how bureaucracies behave?

The overwhelming majority of theory which addresses bureaucracy frames it in a negative light. Weber used the term bureaucracy to describe an organization with certain attributes: large size, a hierarchical organization, formal rules, and specialized tasks (Goodsell, p.5). From this perspective, a bureaucracy could be either a public or private institution. Many theorists contend that a bureaucratic organization demonstrates certain patterns of behavior as well. Bureaucracies are characterized by "rigidity, proceduralism, resistance to change, oppressive control of employees, dehumanized treatment of clients, incomprehensible jargon...and a concentration of political power" (Goodsell, p.5) But even if these caricatures of bureaucracy are true, to some degree, this does not necessarily translate into inefficiency, incompetence, or immorality. Because there have been so many accounts published of "bad bureaucracy" it would be easy to look at these two case studies and say, well, what do you expect? But recently, there have been studies done which argue for the efficiency of bureaucracy, and claim that those highly publicized events which become known as fiascos are truly exceptions to the rule.

In The Case for Bureaucracy, Charles Goodsell notes that when considering the sheer volume of activities that an American bureaucracy undertakes each day, these organizations are, on the whole, very efficient. The odds of an individual experiencing a stereo-typical bureaucratic bungle are phenomenally small. Because of the prevalence of bureaucracy in American society, almost everyone can tell of one experience in their lives where they were "victimized." In a country where millions of administrative transactions occur daily, exposure to mistakes is not uncommon. The problem with regard to the case studies presented here is that these events do not typify the kind of activity that the bureaucracies handled routinely. The operations these bureaucracies were forced to conduct fell outside of their core activities, at the very margin of their responsibilities.

It is true that both the military and any federal law enforcement agency such as ATF conduct inherently risky operations on a routine basis. But within that broad category of risky operations, priorities are placed on different types of operations. In the 1970's the Cold War was the military's highest priority. Activities and training which did not promote Cold War strategy or demonstrate conventional warfare skills were marginalized. Likewise, for ATF, their daily focus is on investigating violations of alcohol, tobacco, and firearms regulations. Within that context, arrests may be made and warrants served which involve a certain degree of risk, but certainly not the kind of risk which Waco presented. Both the military and ATF have demonstrated high levels of efficiency at those tasks which the organization considers to be central tasks. Problems arise when the organization is faced with the responsibility of handling a peripheral task.

One interesting aspect of these case studies is that neither organization really had the option of doing nothing; that is, some action was required. Many private corporations can simply decide not to take on the risk. For example, Ford Motors doesn't have to introduce a new line of automobiles and risk financial losses. A commercial airline could decide not to fly into a certain airport which is prone to unsettled weather and unpredictable winds. However, when called upon, the military must respond. And a federal law enforcement agency is, by law, required to act in the public interest when the situation dictates. Within this context, the case studies show that the mistakes these organizations made do not, for the most part, reflect characteristic flaws of bureaucracy.

The Iran hostage rescue attempt forced the military to act outside the parameters of its own bureaucracy. There was no existing organization within the military to handle this scenario, nor was there policy and procedure available which could be brought out and followed. The situation required a rapid response, creation of an ad-hoc planning element, and a lot of innovative thinking, when it came down to the activities required to get 53 hostages out of an embassy halfway around the world. This is not the kind of activity which comes to mind when discussing bureaucracy. These are not the conditions in which we find bureaucracies to be most efficient. On the contrary, had the military been able to plan and train for the operation within the context of its everyday bureaucracy, the results may have been different.

At Waco, the non-bureaucratic behavior is even more striking. Once again, the challenge facing ATF fell outside the scope of what its existing policies and procedures covered, in terms of offering guidance to the planners. A small group of planners within the ATF organization organized this operation with shockingly little supervision or

oversight, and largely unrestrained by rules or regulations which could have dictated otherwise. In a matter of two months, a major operation was planned and executed. There is no evidence of conflict between the planners and the operators who were directed to carry out the plan, but rather almost blind faith in the decisions of the leadership. As in Iran, the operation did not fail within the rigid structure of bureaucracy. It failed outside the context of organization's traditional *modus operandi*.

For a public institution which must take on the responsibility of such high-risk activities, there are two options. The first option is to identify these types of operations as an activity which needs to be recognized as a core task. As James Q. Wilson pointed out, "tasks that are not defined as central to the mission are often performed poorly or starved for resources" (Wilson, p.110). Following the failed Iran hostage rescue operation, this is the course of action that the military took. Recognizing special operations as an important component of the military's mission expanded the military's capability to respond to such unconventional scenarios and expanded the range of potential scenarios which commanders prepared themselves to handle.

The second option for a public institution is to push this type of high-risk activity entirely outside its scope of responsibilities. Following the ATF raid at Waco, new policies and procedures were established which make the likelihood that ATF would maintain jurisdiction over a scenario such as the one at Waco highly unlikely in the future. For ATF, however, additional steps are necessary. In ATF's case, there is a need to provide training in the fundamentals of planning and executing high risk operations. The mistakes made at Waco lead me to believe that the same mistakes are probably made when planning and executing smaller operations. Even if this is not true, a broader

understanding of the nature of high-risk tactical operations will help the ATF leadership to recognize when its organization's capabilities are being stretched, and when to request assistance from other federal agencies.

An additional challenge for public institutions which conduct high-risk operations involves adopting the kind of rational culture which the Army's Delta Force epitomized. Those personnel interviewed did not express a high degree of confidence that the organizations studied here would ever take the steps necessary to develop an organizational culture which is well-suited to high-risk operations (Knotts, 8-9 Jul 97; Anonymous interview, 2 Jul 97; Anonymous interview, 7 Jul 97). The rationale behind their responses implied that the nature of the American system of democracy, the inherent protection of individual rights, and the uniquely secure position the United States holds in comparison to a number of other developed nations have led to a reactive rather than a proactive stance regarding preparations for scenarios which require the kinds of responses outlined in the previous chapters.

Since the Army's Delta Force arguably had the most suitable organizational culture to accomplish its mission, I was curious to know whether in the aftermath of the Iran rescue operation, attempts were made to infuse some of Delta's expertise and experience into some of the leadership positions which were directly responsible for handling scenarios such as the Iran crisis presented. However, it seems that in some ways, the opposite effect was attained. Following the recognition of Delta's capabilities, "the special forces unit itself began to become institutionalized" (Knotts, 9 Jul 97). As Delta Force became a kind of household name within the military, it fell prey to the very pitfalls it sought to avoid through its rigorous selection and training regimen. A tour with

Delta became recognized as a sure step toward promotion, which initiated a revolving door of personnel changes within the unit, as officers sought to "punch their tickets" with an assignment in the specialized unit. As participation in the special forces unit grew and the size of the organization grew, the organization was normalized, so to speak, which served to discourage those unique personnel who were drawn to Delta for its challenging mission and not for its promotion potential, from volunteering. By the time many of its original members were moving on to other assignments, Delta Force was distinctly different from the unit they had volunteered for, a factor which influenced many to look elsewhere for the challenges that a spot on the original unit offered (Knotts, 9 Jul 97).

There also appear to be historical reasons why Delta's organizational culture is not representative of the broader military. This point is best illustrated through the comparison of the American special forces unit with its foreign counterparts. In many ways, Delta Force was modeled after the European units which had demonstrated great skill in executing special operations in the past. And yet even so, when invited to observe the unit during a training exercise, the Europeans were quick to critique certain aspects of Delta's operations which made it vulnerable, most notably the lack of participation by the government's senior leadership who would be required to get involved if the scenario were really playing itself out. (Beckwith, p.166) In Great Britain, everyone up to and including the Prime Minister routinely participates in such exercises. There were three reasons given as possible explanations for the differing levels of participation by American versus foreign leaders.

First, the notion of civilian control of the military is unique to the United States government, with regard to such a clear separation of powers. Aside from within the

National Security Agency, there are no high-level government positions which are potentially filled by active-duty military members. The service secretaries are all civilian appointees, and the Commander-in-Chief himself is a civilian. There is no military service requirement for any of the above-mentioned positions. This distinct separation of military and civilian affairs, as well as subordination of the military to civilians is an integral part of the checks and balances inherent in our system of government, but especially in recent years, it has enabled a large number of individuals unfamiliar with military operations to find themselves in leadership positions for which they are not adequately prepared.

Historically, the United States has always had a relatively small standing army, and has been extraordinarily reluctant to use any form of military force to handle domestic crises. This same reluctance to apply military force internally has resulted in the development of a complex network of civilian law enforcement agencies. Whereas these agencies are responsible for exerting social control domestically, they have also developed an organizational culture which seeks to present their organization as distinct from any kind of military unit, perhaps in an effort to soften their image in the eyes of the American public.

The Constitution of the United States protects an individual's rights to an unparalleled degree. There is a much lower level of tolerance for the use of force in the United States than perhaps any other nation in the world. Therefore, to support an organizational culture which promotes a strategy which the public, as a whole, may not support in times of peace, would be difficult (if not impossible) for the government to



justify in congressional oversight hearings. The reason why this is true is related to the final critical differentiation between the United States and its international counterparts.

In the United States, the notion of security is very different than it is outside of our borders. The nations who have historically had the best-trained and the most effective special forces units have been those whose national security has been intrinsically vulnerable. To the Israelis, who have one of the finest counter-terrorist units in the world, national security is an issue which is addressed on a daily basis, not merely every few months in a state-of-the-union address. The United States has never known the violence of a Northern Ireland, or the notion of being an occupied territory. Even the threat of invasion during World War II seemed a remote concept for all but the coastal communities. Residents of the United States have lived in a state of near constant security which is unrivaled throughout the world. For this reason, units such as the Army's Delta Force draw little attention and little support, until they are desperately needed. There is generally enough of a time span between crises for both the leadership as well as the public to forget the lessons of the last crisis, and then to be shocked at our failure to handle the incident flawlessly, even though the skills required for such success have not been honed in the intervening years.

For an agency like ATF, which never attained the high standards of a Delta Force, but is in some ways capable of exerting similar levels of state-sponsored force, the reasons why its culture has not evolved into one suitable for handling large-scale high-risk operations can be attributed in part to the organization's historical context. While technically a federal law enforcement agency, for many years its focus was on alcohol and tobacco tax law, and many of its battles were fought in the courtroom. Court

preparations focus on identifying probable cause, obtaining search warrants, and protection of evidence which is critical for successful prosecution. One of the reasons why a raid was preferred over a siege at Waco was to prevent the suspects inside from destroying evidence. Tactical considerations were subordinated to legal considerations. A military unit planning a special operation may take legal issues into consideration, but will not compromise the safety of the participants, or take on unnecessary risks over a legal consideration. Very little time is spent debating the legality of their actions. The decision regarding the authority to act lies above the level of the operators, so that all they need to concern themselves with are the tactics that will result in safe, successful operations. At Waco, the same individuals built the legal case, planned the tactical operation, and then implemented the plan. Placing all of these tasks at one administrative level prevented most of these tasks from being accomplished adequately.

For the ATF to successfully participate in operations on the scale of Waco, the leadership will have to recognize and emphasize the fact that a tactical operation is distinct from a criminal investigation, requires very different skills, and separate planning elements. The same lesson applies to any law enforcement agency, civilian or military, which is responsible for serving high risk warrants, resolving hostage situations, or conducting S.W.A.T. operations.

German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, a master at the art of command in battle, made an insightful distinction between a risk and a gamble:

With a risk, if it doesn't work, you have the means to recover from it. With a gamble, if it doesn't work, you do not. You hazard the entire force. Normally, to succeed, you must take risks. (Clancy, p.152)

The poor strategy ATF used to approach the raid at Waco was a gamble, which certainly hazarded their entire force. The case study demonstrates that they could have taken steps to prevent the need for such a gamble. In Iran, the initial reaction by the JCS to the scenario was that it was a gamble. But as time passed, they were able to progress to the point where the operation was still risky, but no longer a gamble. Unfortunately, they did not progress far enough.

For a bureaucracy responsible for operating in a risky environment, it is critically important that operations involving high levels of risk be designated as central to the organization's core tasks. Only then will leaders routinely consider the risks inherent in these operations, prepare themselves and their subordinates for the chaos which could potentially arise during the execution of such operations, and foster a rational culture which focuses on the most efficient way to achieve the objective at hand.

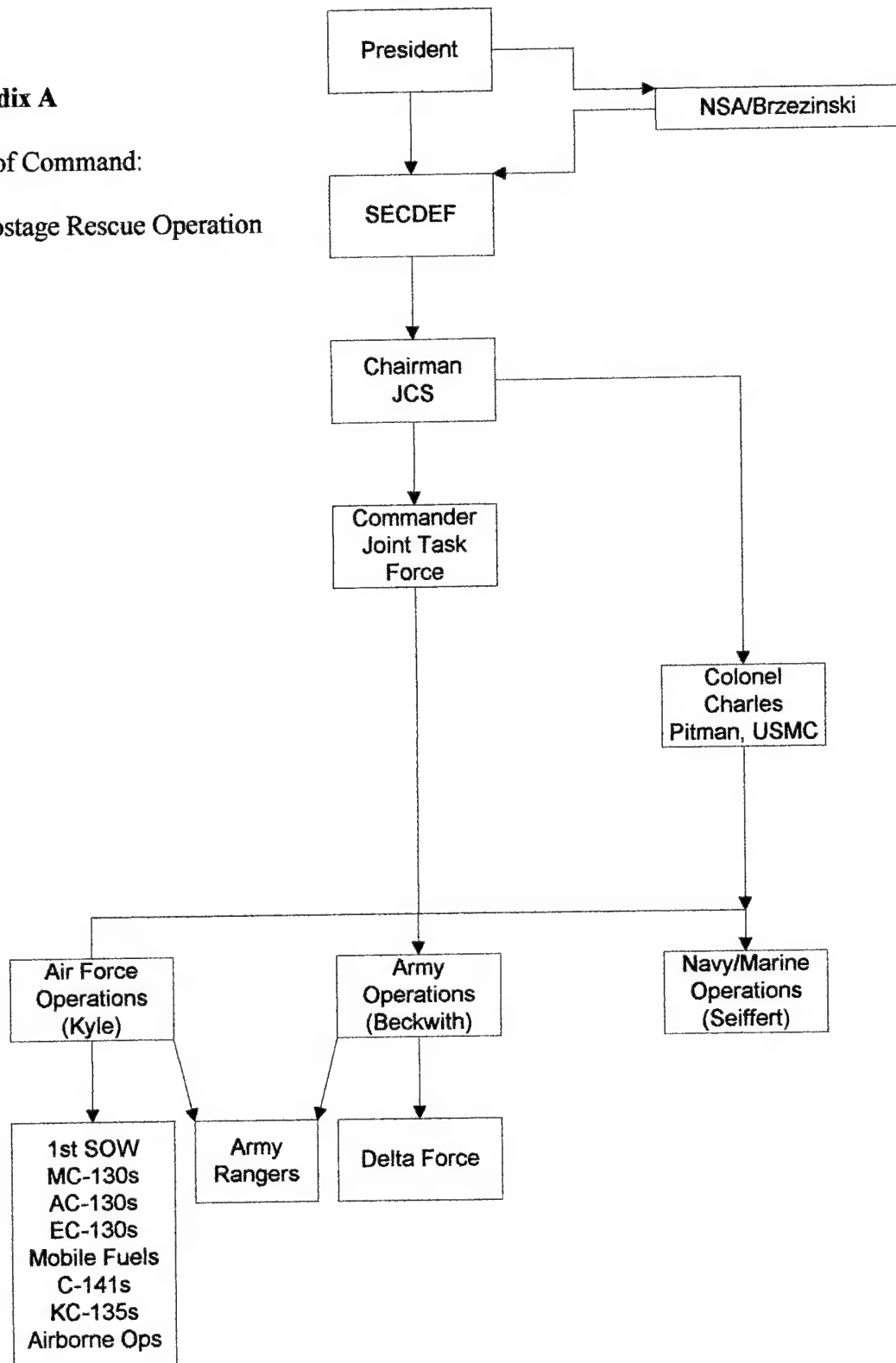
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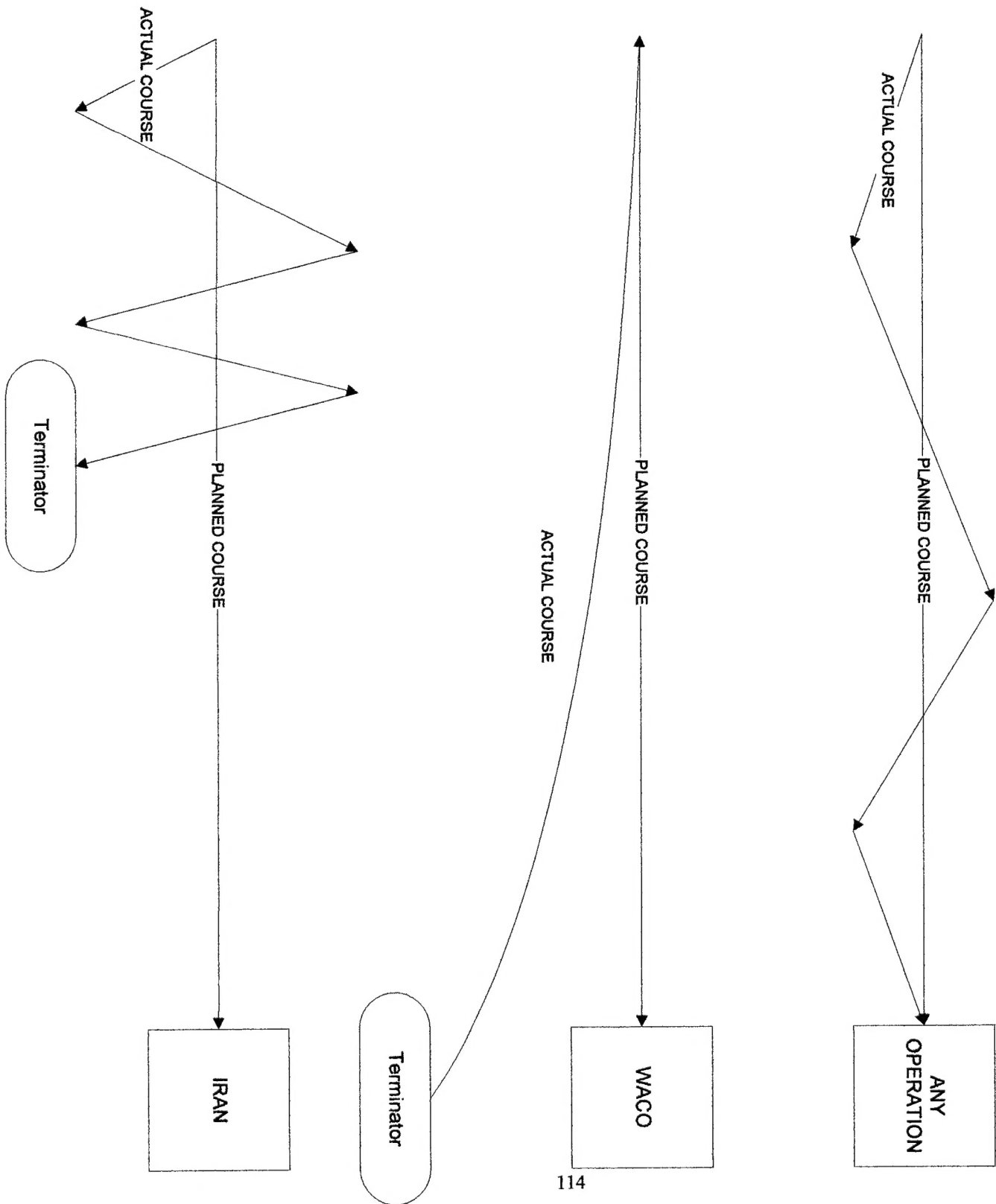
## Appendix A

Chain of Command:

Iran Hostage Rescue Operation



## Appendix B: Operations Inertia



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